Asaph

Frank Stockton

About a hundred feet back from the main street of a village in New Jersey there stood a very good white house. Half-way between it and the sidewalk was a large chestnut-tree, which had been the pride of Mr. Himes, who built the house, and was now the pride of Mrs. Himes, his widow, who lived there.

Under the tree was a bench, and on the bench were two elderly men, both smoking pipes, and each one of them leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. One of these, Thomas Rooper by name, was a small man with gray side-whiskers, a rather thin face, and very good clothes. His pipe was a meerschaum, handsomely colored, with a long amber tip. He had bought that pipe while on a visit to Philadelphia during the great Centennial Exposition; and if any one noticed it and happened to remark what a fine pipe it was, that person would be likely to receive a detailed account of the circumstances of its purchase, with an appendix relating to the Main Building, the Art Building, the Agricultural Building, and many other salient points of the great Exposition which commemorated the centennial of our national independence.

The other man, Asaph Scantle, was of a different type. He was a little older than his companion, but if his hair were gray, it did not show very much, as his rather long locks were of a sandy hue and his full face was clean shaven, at least on Wednesdays and Sundays. He was tall, round-shouldered, and his clothes were not good, possessing very evident claims to a position on the retired list. His pipe consisted of a common clay bowl with a long reed stem.

For some minutes the two men continued to puff together as if they were playing a duet upon tobacco-pipes, and then Asaph, removing his reed from his lips, remarked, “What you ought to do, Thomas, is to marry money.”

“There’s sense in that,” replied the other; “but you wasn’t the first to think of it.”

Asaph, who knew very well that Mr. Rooper never allowed any one to suppose that he received suggestions from without, took no notice of the last remark, but went on: “Lookin’ at the matter in a friendly way, it seems to me it stands to reason that when the shingles on a man’s house is so rotten that the rain comes through into every room on the top floor, and when the plaster on the ceilin’ is tumblin’ down more or less all the time, and the window-sashes is all loose, and things generally in a condition that he can’t let that house without spendin’ at least a year’s rent on it to git it into decent order, and when a man’s got to the time of life—”

“There’s nothin’ the matter with the time of life,” said Thomas; “that’s all right.”

“What I was goin’ to say was,” continued Asaph, “that when a man gits to the time of life when he knows what it is to be comfortable in his mind as well as his body—and that time comes to sensible people as soon as they git fairly growed up—he don’t want to give up his good room in the tavern and all the privileges of the house, and go to live on his own property and have the plaster come down on his own head and the rain come down on the coverlet of his own bed.”

“No, he don’t,” said Thomas; “and what is more, he isn’t goin’ to do it. But what I git from the rent of that house is what I have to live on; there’s no gittin’ around that pint.”

“Well, then,” said Asaph, “if you don’t marry money, what are you goin’ to do? You can’t go back to your old business.”

“I never had but one business,” said Thomas. “I lived with my folks until I was a good deal more than growed up; and when the war broke out I went as sutler to the rigiment from this place; and all the money I made I put into my property in the village here. That’s what I’ve lived on ever since. There’s no more war, so there’s no more sutlers, except away out West where I wouldn’t go; and there are no more folks, for they are all dead; and if what Mrs. McJimsey says is true, there’ll be no more tenants in my house after the 1st of next November. For when the McJimseys go on account of want of general repairs, it is not to be expected that anybody else will come there. There’s nobody in this place that can stand as much as the McJimseys can.”

“Consequently,” said Asaph, deliberately filling his pipe, “it stands to reason that there ain’t nothin’ for you to do but marry money.”

Thomas Rooper took his pipe from his mouth and sat up straight. Gazing steadfastly at his companion, he remarked, “If you think that is such a good thing to do, why don’t you do it yourself? There can’t be anybody much harder up than you are.”

“The law’s agin’ my doin’ it,” said Asaph. “A man can’t marry his sister.”

“Are you thinkin’ of Marietta Himes?” asked Mr. Rooper.

“That’s the one I’m thinkin’ of,” said Asaph. “If you can think of anybody better, I’d like you to mention her.”

Mr. Rooper did not immediately speak. He presently asked, “What do you call money?”

“Well,” said Asaph, with a little hesitation, “considerin’ the circumstances, I should say that in a case like this about fifteen hundred a year, a first-rate house with not a loose shingle on it nor a crack anywhere, a good garden and an orchard, two cows, a piece of meadow-land on the other side of the creek, and all the clothes a woman need have, is money.”

Thomas shrugged his shoulders. “Clothes!” he said. “If she marries she’ll go out of black, and then she’ll have to have new ones, and lots of ’em. That would make a big hole in her money, Asaph.”

The other smiled. “I always knowed you was a far-seein’ feller, Thomas; but it stands to reason that Marietta’s got a lot of clothes that was on hand before she went into mournin’, and she’s not the kind of woman to waste ’em. She’ll be twistin’ ’em about and makin’ ’em over to suit the fashions, and it won’t be like her to be buyin’ new colored goods when she’s got plenty of ’em already.”

There was now another pause in the conversation, and then Mr. Rooper remarked, “Mrs. Himes must be gettin’ on pretty well in years.”

“She’s not a young woman,” said Asaph; “but if she was much younger she wouldn’t have you, and if she was much older you wouldn’t have her. So it strikes me she’s just about the right pint.”

“How old was John Himes when he died?” asked Thomas.

“I don’t exactly know that; but he was a lot older than Marietta.”

Thomas shook his head. “It strikes me,” said he, “that John Himes had a hearty constitution and hadn’t ought to died as soon as he did. He fell away a good deal in the last years of his life.”

“And considerin’ that he died of consumption, he had a right to fall away,” said Asaph. “If what you are drivin’ at, Thomas, is that Marietta isn’t a good housekeeper and hasn’t the right sort of notions of feedin’, look at me. I’ve lived with Marietta just about a year, and in that time I have gained forty-two pounds. Now, of course, I ain’t unreasonable, and don’t mean to say that you would gain forty-two pounds in a year, ‘cause you ain’t got the frame and bone to put it on; but it wouldn’t surprise me a bit if you was to gain twenty, or even twenty-five, pounds in eighteen months, anyway; and more than that you ought not to ask, Thomas, considerin’ your height and general build.”

“Isn’t Marietta Himes a good deal of a freethinker?” asked Thomas.

“A what?” cried Asaph. “You mean an infidel?”

“No,” said Thomas, “I don’t charge nobody with nothin’ more than there’s reason for; but they do say that she goes sometimes to one church and sometimes to another, and that if there was a Catholic church in this village she would go to that. And who’s goin’ to say

where a woman will turn up when she don't know her own mind better than that?"

Asaph colored a little. "The place where Marietta will turn up," said he, warmly, "is on a front seat in the kingdom of heaven; and if the people that talk about her will mend their ways, they'll see that I am right. You need not trouble yourself about that, Thomas. Marietta Himes is pious to the heel."

Mr. Rooper now shifted himself a little on the bench and crossed one leg over the other. "Now look here, Asaph," he said, with a little more animation than he had yet shown, "supposin' all you say is true, have you got any reason to think that Mrs. Himes ain't satisfied with things as they are?"

"Yes, I have," said Asaph. "And I don't mind tellin' you that the thing she's least satisfied with is me. She wants a man in the house; that is nateral. She wouldn't be Marietta Himes if she didn't. When I come to live with her I thought the whole business was settled; but it isn't. I don't suit her. I don't say she's lookin' for another man, but if another man was to come along, and if he was the right kind of a man, it's my opinion she's ready for him. I wouldn't say this to everybody, but I say it to you, Thomas Rooper, 'cause I know what kind of a man you are."

Mr. Rooper did not return the compliment. "I don't wonder your sister ain't satisfied with you," he said, "for you go ahead of all the lazy men I ever saw yet. They was sayin' down at the tavern yesterday—only yesterday—that you could do less work in more time than anybody they ever saw before."

"There's two ways of workin'," said Asaph. "Some people work with their hands and some with their heads."

Thomas grimly smiled. "It strikes me," said he, "that the most head-work you do is with your jaws."

Asaph was not the man to take offence readily, especially when he considered it against his interest to do so, and he showed no resentment at this remark. " 'Tain't so much my not makin' myself more generally useful," he said, "that Marietta objects to; though, of course, it could not be expected that a man that hasn't got any interest in property would keep workin' at it like a man that has got an interest in it, such as Marietta's husband would have; but it's my general appearance that she don't like. She's told me more than once she didn't so much mind my bein' lazy as lookin' lazy."

"I don't wonder she thinks that way," said Thomas. "But look here, Asaph, do you suppose that if Marietta Himes was to marry a man, he would really come into her property?"

“There ain’t nobody that knows my sister better than I know her, and I can say, without any fear of bein’ contradicted, that when she gives herself to a man the good-will and fixtures will be included.”

Thomas Rooper now leaned forward with his elbows on his knees without smoking, and Asaph Scantle leaned forward with his elbows on his knees without smoking. And thus they remained, saying nothing to each other, for the space of some ten minutes.

Asaph was a man who truly used his head a great deal more than he used his hands. He had always been a shiftless fellow, but he was no fool, and this his sister found out soon after she asked him to come and make his home with her. She had not done this because she wanted a man in the house, for she had lived two or three years without that convenience and had not felt the need of it. But she heard that Asaph was in very uncomfortable circumstances, and she had sent for him solely for his own good. The arrangement proved to be a very good one for her brother, but not a good one for her. She had always known that Asaph’s head was his main dependence, but she was just beginning to discover that he liked to use his head so that other people’s hands should work for him.

“There ain’t nobody comin’ to see your sister, is there?” asked Thomas, suddenly.

“Not a livin’ soul,” said Asaph, “except women, married folk, and children. But it has always surprised me that nobody did come; but just at this minute the field’s clear and the gate’s open.”

“Well,” said Mr. Rooper, “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s right,” said Asaph, rubbing his knees with his hands. “That’s right. But now tell me, Thomas Rooper, supposin’ you get Marietta, what are you goin’ to do for me?”

“For you?” exclaimed the other. “What have you got to do with it?”

“A good deal,” said Asaph. “If you get Marietta with her fifteen hundred a year—and it wouldn’t surprise me if it was eighteen hundred—and her house and her garden and her cattle and her field and her furniture, with not a leg loose nor a scratch, you will get her because I proposed her to you, and because I backed you up afterward. And now, then, I want to know what you are goin’ to do for me?”

“What do you want?” asked Thomas.

“The first thing I want,” said Asaph, “is a suit of clothes. These clothes is disgraceful.”

“You are right there,” said Mr. Rooper. “I wonder your sister lets you come around in front

of the house. But what do you mean by clothes—winter clothes or summer clothes?"

"Winter," said Asaph, without hesitation. "I don't count summer clothes. And when I say a suit of clothes, I mean shoes and hat and underclothes."

Mr. Rooper gave a sniff. "I wonder you don't say overcoat," he remarked.

"I do say overcoat," replied Asaph. "A suit of winter clothes is a suit of clothes that you can go out into the weather in without missin' nothin'."

Mr. Rooper smiled sarcastically. "Is there anything else you want?" he asked.

"Yes," said Asaph, decidedly; "there is. I want a umbrella."

"Cotton or silk?"

Asaph hesitated. He had never had a silk umbrella in his hand in his life. He was afraid to strike too high, and he answered, "I want a good stout gingham."

Mr. Rooper nodded his head. "Very good," he said. "And is that all?"

"No," said Asaph, "it ain't all. There is one more thing I want, and that is a dictionary."

The other man rose to his feet. "Upon my word," he exclaimed, "I never before saw a man that would sell his sister for a dictionary! And what you want with a dictionary is past my conceivin'."

"Well, it ain't past mine," said Asaph. "For more than ten years I have wanted a dictionary. If I had a dictionary I could make use of my head in a way that I can't now. There is books in this house, but amongst 'em there is no dictionary. If there had been one I'd been a different man by this time from what I am now, and like as not Marietta wouldn't have wanted any other man in the house but me."

Mr. Rooper stood looking upon the ground; and Asaph, who had also arisen, waited for him to speak. "You are a graspin' man, Asaph," said Thomas. "But there is another thing I'd like to know: if I give you them clothes, you don't want them before she's married?"

"Yes, I do," said Asaph. "If I come to the weddin', I can't wear these things. I have got to have them first."

Mr. Rooper gave his head a little twist. "There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip," said he.

“Yes,” said Asaph; “and there’s different cups and different lips. But what’s more, if I was to be best man—which would be nateral, considerin’ I’m your friend and her brother—you wouldn’t want me standin’ up in this rig. And that’s puttin’ it in your own point of view, Thomas.”

“It strikes me,” said the other, “that I could get a best man that would furnish his own clothes; but we will see about that. There’s another thing, Asaph,” he said, abruptly; “what are Mrs. Himes’s views concernin’ pipes?”

This question startled and frightened Asaph. He knew that his sister could not abide the smell of tobacco and that Mr. Rooper was an inveterate smoker.

“That depends,” said he, “on the kind of tobacco. I don’t mind sayin’ that Marietta isn’t partial to the kind of tobacco I smoke. But I ain’t a moneyed man and I can’t afford to buy nothin’ but cheap stuff. But when it comes to a meerschaum pipe and the very finest Virginia or North Carolina smoking-tobacco, such as a moneyed man would be likely to use —”

At this moment there came from the house the sound of a woman’s voice, not loud, but clear and distinct, and it said “Asaph.”

This word sent through Mr. Rooper a gentle thrill such as he did not remember ever having felt before. There seemed to be in it a suggestion, a sort of prophecy, of what appeared to him as an undefined and chaotic bliss. He was not a fanciful man, but he could not help imagining himself standing alone under that chestnut-tree and that voice calling “Thomas.”

Upon Asaph the effect was different. The interruption was an agreeable one in one way, because it cut short his attempted explanation of the tobacco question; but in another way he knew that it meant the swinging of an axe, and that was not pleasant.

Mr. Rooper walked back to the tavern in a cogitative state of mind. “That Asaph Scantle,” he said to himself, “has got a head-piece, there’s no denying it. If it had not been for him I do not believe I should have thought of his sister; at least not until the McJimseys had left my house, and then it might have been too late.”

Marietta Himes was a woman with a gentle voice and an appearance and demeanor indicative of a general softness of disposition; but beneath this mild exterior there was a great deal of firmness of purpose. Asaph had not seen very much of his sister since she had grown up and married; and when he came to live with her he thought that he was going to have things pretty much his own way. But it was not long before he entirely changed his

mind.

Mrs. Himes was of moderate height, pleasant countenance, and a figure inclined to plumpness. Her dark hair, in which there was not a line of gray, was brushed down smoothly on each side of her face, and her dress, while plain, was extremely neat. In fact, everything in the house and on the place was extremely neat, except Asaph.

She was in the bright little dining-room which looked out on the flower-garden, preparing the table for supper, placing every plate, dish, glass, and cup with as much care and exactness as if a civil engineer had drawn a plan on the table-cloth with places marked for the position of each article.

As she finished her work by placing a chair on each side of the table, a quiet smile, the result of a train of thought in which she had been indulging for the past half-hour, stole over her face. She passed through the kitchen, with a glance at the stove to see if the tea-kettle had begun to boil; and going out of the back door, she walked over to the shed where her brother was splitting kindling-wood.

“Asaph,” said Mrs. Himes, “if I were to give you a good suit of clothes, would you promise me that you would never smoke when wearing them?”

Her brother looked at her in amazement. “Clothes!” he repeated.

“Mr. Himes was about your size,” said his sister, “and he left a good many clothes, which are most of them very good and carefully packed away, so that I am sure there is not a moth-hole in any one of them. I have several times thought, Asaph, that I might give you some of his clothes; but it did seem to me a desecration to have the clothes of such a man, who was so particular and nice, filled and saturated with horrible tobacco-smoke, which he detested. But now you are getting to be so awful shabby, I do not see how I can stand it any longer. But one thing I will not do—I will not have Mr. Himes’s clothes smelling of tobacco as yours do; and not only your own tobacco, but Mr. Rooper’s.”

“I think,” said Asaph, “that you are not exactly right just there. What you smell about me is my smoke. Thomas Rooper never uses anything but the finest-scented and delicatest brands. I think that if you come to get used to his tobacco-smoke you would like it. But as to my takin’ off my clothes and puttin’ on a different suit every time I want to light my pipe, that’s pretty hard lines, it seems to me.”

“It would be a good deal easier to give up the pipe,” said his sister.

“I will do that,” said Asaph, “when you give up tea. But you know as well as I do that there’s no use of either of us a-tryin’ to change our comfortable habits at our time of life.”

“I kept on hoping,” said Mrs. Himes, “that you would feel yourself that you were not fit to be seen by decent people, and that you would go to work and earn at least enough money to buy yourself some clothes. But as you don’t seem inclined to do that, I thought I would make you this offer. But you must understand that I will not have you smoke in Mr. Himes’s clothes.”

Asaph stood thinking, the head of his axe resting upon the ground, a position which suited him. He was in a little perplexity. Marietta’s proposition seemed to interfere somewhat with the one he had made to Thomas Rooper. Here was a state of affairs which required most careful consideration. “I’ve been arrangin’ about some clothes,” he said, presently; “for I know very well I need ’em; but I don’t know just yet how it will turn out.”

“I hope, Asaph,” said Marietta, quickly, “that you are not thinking of going into debt for clothing, and I know that you haven’t been working to earn money. What arrangements have you been making?”

“That’s my private affair,” said Asaph, “but there’s no debt in it. It is all fair and square—cash down, so to speak; though, of course, it’s not cash, but work. But, as I said before, that isn’t settled.”

“I am afraid, Asaph,” said his sister, “that if you have to do the work first you will never get the clothes, and so you might as well come back to my offer.”

Asaph came back to it and thought about it very earnestly. If by any chance he could get two suits of clothes, he would then feel that he had a head worth having. “What would you say,” he said, presently, “if when I wanted to smoke I was to put on a long duster—I guess Mr. Himes had dusters—and a nightcap and rubbers? I’d agree to hang the duster and the cap in the shed here and never smoke without putting ’em on.” There was a deep purpose in this proposition, for, enveloped in the long duster, he might sit with Thomas Rooper under the chestnut-tree and smoke and talk and plan as long as he pleased, and his companion would not know that he did not need a new suit of clothes.

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Himes; “you must make up your mind to act perfectly fairly, Asaph, or else say you will not accept my offer. But if you don’t accept it, I can’t see how you can keep on living with me.”

“What do you mean by clothes, Marietta?” he asked.

“Well, I mean a complete suit, of course,” said she.

“Winter or summer?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Mrs. Himes replied; “but that can be as you choose.”

“Overcoat?” asked Asaph.

“Yes,” said she, “and cane and umbrella, if you like, and pocket-handkerchiefs, too. I will fit you out completely, and shall be glad to have you looking like a decent man.”

At the mention of the umbrella another line of perplexity showed itself upon Asaph’s brow. The idea came to him that if she would add a dictionary he would strike a bargain. Thomas Rooper was certainly a very undecided and uncertain sort of man. But then there came up the thought of his pipe, and he was all at sea again. Giving up smoking was almost the same as giving up eating. “Marietta,” said he, “I will think about this.”

“Very well,” she answered; “but it’s my opinion, Asaph, that you ought not to take more than one minute to think about it. However, I will give you until to-morrow morning, and then if you decide that you don’t care to look like a respectable citizen, I must have some further talk with you about our future arrangements.”

“Make it to-morrow night,” said Asaph. And his sister consented.

The next day Asaph was unusually brisk and active; and very soon after breakfast he walked over to the village tavern to see Mr. Rooper.

“Hello!” exclaimed that individual, surprised at his visitor’s early appearance at the business centre of the village. “What’s started you out? Have you come after them clothes?”

A happy thought struck Asaph. He had made this visit with the intention of feeling his way toward some decision on the important subject of his sister’s proposition, and here a way seemed to be opened to him. “Thomas,” said he, taking his friend aside, “I am in an awful fix. Marietta can’t stand my clothes any longer. If she can’t stand them she can’t stand me, and when it comes to that, you can see for yourself that I can’t help you.”

A shade settled upon Mr. Rooper’s face. During the past evening he had been thinking and puffing, and puffing and thinking, until everybody else in the tavern had gone to bed; and he had finally made up his mind that, if he could do it, he would marry Marietta Himes. He had never been very intimate with her or her husband, but he had been to meals in the house, and he remembered the fragrant coffee and the light, puffy, well-baked rolls made by Marietta’s own hands; and he thought of the many differences between living in that very good house with that gentle, pleasant-voiced lady and his present life in the village tavern.

And so, having determined that without delay he would, with the advice and assistance of

Asaph, begin his courtship, it was natural that he should feel a shock of discouragement when he heard Asaph's announcement that his sister could not endure him in the house any longer. To attack that house and its owner without the friendly offices upon which he depended was an undertaking for which he was not at all prepared.

"I don't wonder at her," he said, sharply—"not a bit. But this puts a mighty different face on the thing what we talked about yesterday."

"It needn't," said Asaph, quietly. "The clothes you was goin' to give me wouldn't cost a cent more to-day than they would in a couple of months, say; and when I've got 'em on Marietta will be glad to have me around. Everything can go on just as we bargained for."

Thomas shook his head. "That would be a mighty resky piece of business," he said. "You would be all right, but that's not sayin' that I would; for it strikes me that your sister is about as much a bird in the bush as any flyin' critter."

Asaph smiled. "If the bush was in the middle of a field," said he, "and there was only one boy after the bird, it would be a pretty tough job. But if the bush is in the corner of two high walls, and there's two boys, and one of 'em's got a fishnet what he can throw clean over the bush, why, then the chances is a good deal better. But droppin' figgers, Thomas, and speakin' plain and straightforward, as I always do—"

"About things you want to git," interrupted Thomas.

"—about everything," resumed Asaph. "I'll just tell you this: if I don't git decent clothes now to-day, or perhaps to-morrow, I have got to travel out of Marietta's house. I can do it and she knows it. I can go back to Drummondville and git my board for keepin' books in the store, and nobody there cares what sort of clothes I wear. But when that happens, your chance of gittin' Marietta goes up higher than a kite."

To the mind of Mr. Rooper this was most conclusive reasoning; but he would not admit it and he did not like it. "Why don't your sister give you clothes?" he said. "Old Himes must have left some."

A thin chill like a needleful of frozen thread ran down Asaph's back. "Mr. Himes's clothes!" he exclaimed. "What in the world are you talkin' about, Thomas Rooper? 'Tain't likely he had many, 'cept what he was buried in; and what's left, if there is any, Marietta would no more think of givin' away than she would of hangin' up his funeral wreath for the canary-bird to perch on. There's a room up in the garret where she keeps his special things—for she's awful particular—and if there is any of his clothes up there I expect she's got 'em framed."

“If she thinks as much of him as that,” muttered Mr. Rooper.

“Now don’t git any sech ideas as them into your head, Thomas,” said Asaph, quickly. “Marietta ain’t a woman to rake up the past, and you never need be afraid of her rakin’ up Mr. Himes. All of the premises will be hern and yourn except that room in the garret, and it ain’t likely she’ll ever ask you to go in there.”

“The Lord knows I don’t want to!” ejaculated Mr. Rooper.

The two men walked slowly to the end of a line of well-used, or, rather, badly used, wooden arm-chairs which stood upon the tavern piazza, and seated themselves. Mr. Rooper’s mind was in a highly perturbed condition. If he accepted Asaph’s present proposition he would have to make a considerable outlay with a very shadowy prospect of return.

“If you haven’t got the ready money for the clothes,” said Asaph, after having given his companion some minutes for silent consideration, “there ain’t a man in this village what they would trust sooner at the store for clothes,” and then after a pause he added, “or books, which, of course, they can order from town.”

At this Mr. Rooper simply shrugged his shoulders. The question of ready money or credit did not trouble him.

At this moment a man in a low phaeton, drawn by a stout gray horse, passed the tavern.

“Who’s that?” asked Asaph, who knew everybody in the village.

“That’s Doctor Wicker,” said Thomas. “He lives over at Timberley. He ‘tended John Himes in his last sickness.”

“He don’t practise here, does he?” said Asaph. “I never see him.”

“No; but he was called in to consult.” And then the speaker dropped again into cogitation.

After a few minutes Asaph rose. He knew that Thomas Rooper had a slow-working mind, and thought it would be well to leave him to himself for a while. “I’ll go home,” said he, “and ‘tend to my chores, and by the time you feel like comin’ up and takin’ a smoke with me under the chestnut-tree, I reckon you will have made up your mind, and we’ll settle this thing. Fer if I have got to go back to Drummondville, I s’pose I’ll have to pack up this afternoon.”

“If you’d say pack off instead of pack up,” remarked the other, “you’d come nearer the facts, considerin’ the amount of your personal property. But I’ll be up there in an hour or two.”

When Asaph came within sight of his sister's house he was amazed to see a phaeton and a gray horse standing in front of the gate. From this it was easy to infer that the doctor was in the house. What on earth could have happened? Was anything the matter with Marietta? And if so, why did she send for a physician who lived at a distance, instead of Doctor McIlvaine, the village doctor? In a very anxious state of mind Asaph reached the gate, and irresolutely went into the yard. His impulse was to go to the house and see what had happened; but he hesitated. He felt that Marietta might object to having a comparative stranger know that such an exceedingly shabby fellow was her brother. And, besides, his sister could not have been overtaken by any sudden illness. She had always appeared perfectly well, and there would have been no time during his brief absence from the house to send over to Timberley for a doctor.

So he sat down under the chestnut-tree to consider this strange condition of affairs. "Whatever it is," he said to himself, "it's nothin' suddint, and it's bound to be chronic, and that'll skeer Thomas. I wish I hadn't asked him to come up here. The best thing for me to do will be to pretend that I have been sent to git somethin' at the store, and go straight back and keep him from comin' up."

But Asaph was a good deal quicker to think than to move, and he still sat with brows wrinkled and mind beset by doubts. For a moment he thought that it might be well to accept Marietta's proposition and let Thomas go; but then he remembered the conditions, and he shut his mental eyes at the prospect.

At that moment the gate opened and in walked Thomas Rooper. He had made up his mind and had come to say so; but the sight of the phaeton and gray horse caused him to postpone his intended announcement. "What's Doctor Wicker doin' here?" he asked, abruptly.

"Dunno," said Asaph, as carelessly as he could speak. "I don't meddle with household matters of that kind. I expect it's somethin' the matter with that gal Betsey, that Marietta hires to help her. She's always wrong some way or other so that she can't do her own proper work, which I know, havin' to do a good deal of it myself. I expect it's rickets, like as not. Gals do have that sort of thing, don't they?"

"Never had anything to do with sick gals," said Thomas, "or sick people of any sort, and don't want to. But it must be somethin' pretty deep-seated for your sister to send all the way to Timberley for a doctor."

Asaph knew very well that Mrs. Himes was too economical a person to think of doing such a thing as that, and he knew also that Betsey was as good a specimen of rustic health as could be found in the county. And therefore his companion's statement that he wanted to have nothing to do with sick people had for him a saddening import.

“I settled that business of yourn,” said Mr. Rooper, “pretty soon after you left me. I thought I might as well come straight around and tell you about it. I’ll make you a fair and square offer. I’ll give you them clothes, though it strikes me that winter goods will be pretty heavy for this time of year; but it will be on this condition: if I don’t get Marietta, you have got to give ’em back.”

Asaph smiled.

“I know what you are grinnin’ at,” said Thomas; “but you needn’t think that you are goin’ to have the wearin’ of them clothes for two or three months and then give ’em back. I don’t go in for any long courtships. What I do in that line will be short and sharp.”

“How short?” asked Asaph.

“Well, this is Thursday,” replied the other, “and I calculate to ask her on Monday.”

Asaph looked at his companion in amazement. “By George!” he exclaimed, “that won’t work. Why, it took Marietta more’n five days to make up her mind whether she would have the chicken-house painted green or red, and you can’t expect her to be quicker than that in takin’ a new husband. She’d say No just as certain as she would now if you was to go in and ask her right before the doctor and Betsey. And I’ll just tell you plain that it wouldn’t pay me to do all the hustlin’ around and talkin’ and argyin’ and recommendin’ that I’d have to do just for the pleasure of wearin’ a suit of warm clothes for four July days. I tell you what it is, it won’t do to spring that sort of thing on a woman, especially when she’s what you might call a trained widder. You got to give ’em time to think over the matter and to look up your references. There’s no use talkin’ about it; you must give ’em time, especially when the offer comes from a person that nobody but me has ever thought of as a marryin’ man.”

“Humph!” said Thomas. “That’s all you know about it.”

“Facts is facts, and you can’t git around ’em. There isn’t a woman in this village what wouldn’t take at least two weeks to git it into her head that you was really courtin’ her. She would be just as likely to think that you was tryin’ to git a tenant in place of the McJimseys. But a month of your courtin’ and a month of my workin’ would just about make the matter all right with Marietta, and then you could sail in and settle it.”

“Very good,” said Mr. Rooper, rising suddenly. “I will court your sister for one month; and if, on the 17th day of August, she takes me, you can go up to the store and git them clothes; but you can’t do it one minute afore. Good-mornin’.”

Asaph, left alone, heaved a sigh. He did not despair; but truly, fate was heaping a great

many obstacles in his path. He thought it was a very hard thing for a man to get his rights in this world.

Mrs. Himes sat on one end of a black hair-covered sofa in the parlor, and Doctor Wicker sat on a black hair-covered chair opposite to her and not far away. The blinds of the window opening upon the garden were drawn up; but those on the front window, which commanded a view of the chestnut-tree, were down. Doctor Wicker had just made a proposal of marriage to Mrs. Himes, and at that moment they were both sitting in silence.

The doctor, a bluff, hearty-looking man of about forty-five, had been very favorably impressed by Mrs. Himes when he first made her acquaintance, during her husband's sickness, and since that time he had seen her occasionally and had thought about her a great deal. Latterly letters had passed between them, and now he had come to make his declaration in person.

It was true, as her brother had said, that Marietta was not quick in making up her mind. But in this case she was able to act more promptly than usual, because she had in a great measure settled this matter before the arrival of the doctor. She knew he was going to propose, and she was very much inclined to accept him. This it was which had made her smile when she was setting the table the afternoon before, and this it was which had prompted her to make her proposition to her brother in regard to his better personal appearance.

But now she was in a condition of nervous trepidation, and made no answer. The doctor thought this was natural enough under the circumstances, but he had no idea of the cause of it. The cause of it was sitting under the chestnut-tree, the bright sunlight, streaming through a break in the branches above, illuminating and emphasizing and exaggerating his extreme shabbiness. The doctor had never seen Asaph, and it would have been a great shock to Marietta's self-respect to have him see her brother in his present aspect.

Through a crack in the blind of the front window she had seen Asaph come in and sit down, and she had seen Mr. Rooper arrive and had noticed his departure. And now, with an anxiety which made her chin tremble, she sat and hoped that Asaph would get up and go away. For she knew that if she should say to the doctor what she was perfectly willing to say then and there, he would very soon depart, being a man of practical mind and pressing business; and that, going to the front door with him, she would be obliged to introduce him to a prospective brother-in-law whose appearance, she truly believed, would make him sick. For the doctor was a man, she well knew, who was quite as nice and particular about dress and personal appearance as the late Mr. Himes had been.

Doctor Wicker, aware that the lady's perturbation was increasing instead of diminishing, thought it wise not to press the matter at this moment. He felt that he had been, perhaps, a

little over-prompt in making his proposition. “Madam,” said he, rising, “I will not ask you to give me an answer now. I will go away and let you think about it, and will come again to-morrow.”

Through the crack in the window-blind Marietta saw that Asaph was still under the tree. What could she do to delay the doctor? She did not offer to take leave of him, but stood looking upon the floor. It seemed a shame to make so good a man go all the way back to Timberley and come again next day, just because that ragged, dirty Asaph was sitting under the chestnut-tree.

The doctor moved toward the door, and as she followed him she glanced once more through the crack in the window-blind, and, to her intense delight, she saw Asaph jump up from the bench and run around to the side of the house. He had heard the doctor’s footsteps in the hallway and had not wished to meet him. The unsatisfactory condition of his outward appearance had been so strongly impressed upon him of late that he had become a little sensitive in regard to it when strangers were concerned. But if he had only known that his exceedingly unattractive garments had prevented his sister from making a compact which would have totally ruined his plans in regard to her matrimonial disposition and his own advantage, he would have felt for those old clothes the respect and gratitude with which a Roman soldier regarded the shield and sword which had won him a battle.

Down the middle of the garden, at the back of the house, there ran a path, and along this path Asaph walked meditatively, with his hands in his trousers pockets. It was a discouraging place for him to walk, for the beds on each side of him were full of weeds, which he had intended to pull out as soon as he should find time for the work, but which had now grown so tall and strong that they could not be rooted up without injuring the plants, which were the legitimate occupants of the garden.

Asaph did not know it, but at this moment there was not one person in the whole world who thought kindly of him. His sister was so mortified by him that she was in tears in the house. His crony, Thomas, had gone away almost angry with him, and even Betsey, whom he had falsely accused of rickets, and who had often shown a pity for him simply because he looked so forlorn, had steeled her heart against him that morning when she found he had gone away without providing her with any fuel for the kitchen fire.

But he had not made a dozen turns up and down the path before he became aware of the feeling of Marietta. She looked out of the back door and then walked rapidly toward him. “Asaph,” said she, “I hope you are considering what I said to you yesterday, for I mean to stick to my word. If you don’t choose to accept my offer, I want you to go back to Drummondville early to-morrow morning. And I don’t feel in the least as if I were turning you out of the house, for I have given you a chance to stay here, and have only asked you to act like a decent Christian. I will not have you here disgracing my home. When Doctor

Wicker came to-day, and I looked out and saw you with that miserable little coat with the sleeves half-way up to the elbows and great holes in it which you will not let anybody patch because you are too proud to wear patches, and those wretched faded trousers, out at the knees, and which have been turned up and hemmed at the bottom so often that they are six inches above your shoes, and your whole scarecrow appearance, I was so ashamed of you that I could not keep the tears out of my eyes. To tell a respectable gentleman like Doctor Wicker that you were my brother was more than I could bear; and I was glad when I saw you get up and sneak out of the way. I hate to talk to you in this way, Asaph, but you have brought it on yourself."

Her brother looked at her a moment. "Do you want me to go away before breakfast?" he said.

"No," answered Marietta, "but immediately afterward." And in her mind she resolved that breakfast should be very early the next morning.

If Asaph had any idea of yielding, he did not intend to show it until the last moment, and so he changed the subject. "What's the matter with Betsey?" said he. "If she's out of health you'd better get rid of her."

"There's nothing the matter with Betsey," answered his sister. "Doctor Wicker came to see me."

"Came to see you!" exclaimed her brother. "What in the world did he do that for? You never told me that you were ailin'. Is it that sprain in your ankle?"

"Nonsense," said Marietta. "I had almost recovered from that sprain when you came here. There's nothing the matter with my ankle; the trouble is probably with my heart."

The moment she said this she regretted it, for Asaph had so good a head, and could catch meanings so quickly.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Marietta," said Asaph. "That's a good deal more serious."

"Yes," said she. And she turned and went back to the house.

Asaph continued to walk up and down the path. He had not done a stroke of work that morning, but he did not think of that. His sister's communication saddened him. He liked Marietta, and it grieved him to hear that she had anything the matter with her heart. He knew that that often happened to people who looked perfectly well, and there was no reason why he should have suspected any disorder in her. Of course, in this case, there was good reason for her sending for the very best doctor to be had. It was all plain enough to him now.

But as he walked and walked and walked, and looked at the garden, and looked at the little orchard, and looked at the house and the top of the big chestnut-tree, which showed itself above the roof, a thought came into his mind which had never been there before—he was Marietta's heir. It was a dreadful thing to think of his sister's possible early departure from this world; but, after all, life is life, reality is reality, and business is business. He was Marietta's only legal heir.

Of course he had known this before, but it had never seemed to be of any importance. He was a good deal older than she was, and he had always looked upon her as a marrying woman. When he made his proposition to Mr. Rooper the thought of his own heirship never came into his mind. In fact, if any one had offered him ten dollars for said heirship, he would have asked fifteen, and would have afterward agreed to split the difference and take twelve and a half.

But now everything had changed. If Marietta had anything the matter with her heart there was no knowing when all that he saw might be his own. No sooner had he walked and thought long enough for his mind to fully appreciate the altered aspects of his future than he determined to instantly thrust out Mr. Rooper from all connection with that future. He would go and tell him so at once.

To the dismay of Betsey, who had been watching him, expecting that he would soon stop walking about and go and saw some wood with which to cook the dinner, he went out of the front gate and strode rapidly into the village. He had some trouble in finding Mr. Rooper, who had gone off to take a walk and arrange a conversation with which to begin his courtship of Mrs. Himes; but he overtook him under a tree by the side of the creek. "Thomas," said he, "I have changed my mind about that business between us. You have been very hard on me, and I'm not goin' to stand it. I can get the clothes and things I need without makin' myself your slave and workin' myself to death, and, perhaps, settin' my sister agin me for life by tryin' to make her believe that black's white, that you are the kind of husband she ought to have, and that you hate pipes and never touch spirits. It would be a mean thing for me to do, and I won't do it. I did think you were a generous-minded man, with the right sort of feeling for them as wanted to be your friends; but I have found out that I was mistook, and I'm not goin' to sacrifice my sister to any such person. Now that's my state of mind plain and square."

Thomas Rooper shrunk two inches in height. "Asaph Scantle," he said, in a voice which seemed also to have shrunk, "I don't understand you. I wasn't hard on you. I only wanted to make a fair bargain. If I'd got her, I'd paid up cash on delivery. You couldn't expect a man to do more than that. But I tell you, Asaph, that I am mighty serious about this. The more I have thought about your sister the more I want her. And when I tell you that I've been a-thinkin' about her pretty much all night, you may know that I want her a good deal. And I

was intendin' to go to-morrow and begin to court her."

"Well, you needn't," said Asaph. "It won't do no good. If you don't have me to back you up you might as well try to twist that tree as to move her. You can't do it."

"But you don't mean to go agin me, do you, Asaph?" asked Thomas, ruefully.

" 'Tain't necessary," replied the other. "You will go agin yourself."

For a few moments Mr. Rooper remained silent. He was greatly discouraged and dismayed by what had been said to him, but he could not yet give up what had become the great object of his life. "Asaph," said he, presently, "it cuts me to the in'ards to think that you have gone back on me; but I tell you what I'll do: if you will promise not to say anything agin me to Mrs. Himes, and not to set yourself in any way between me and her, I'll go along with you to the store now, and you can git that suit of clothes and the umbrella, and I'll tell 'em to order the dictionary and hand it over to you as soon as it comes. I'd like you to help me, but if you will only promise to stand out of the way and not hinder, I'll do the fair thing by you and pay in advance."

"Humph!" said Asaph. "I do believe you think you are the only man that wants Marietta."

A pang passed through the heart of Mr. Rooper. He had been thinking a great deal of Mrs. Himes and everything connected with her, and he had even thought of that visit of Doctor Wicker's. That gentleman was a widower and a well-to-do and well-appearing man; and it would have been a long way for him to come just for some trifling rickets in a servant-girl. Being really in love, his imagination was in a very capering mood, and he began to fear that the doctor had come to court Mrs. Himes. "Asaph," he said, quickly, "that's a good offer I make you. If you take it, in less than an hour you can walk home looking like a gentleman."

Asaph had taken his reed pipe from his coat pocket and was filling it. As he pushed the coarse tobacco into the bowl, he considered. "Thomas," said he, "that ain't enough. Things have changed, and it wouldn't pay me. But I won't be hard on you. I'm a good friend of yourn, and I'll tell you what I'll do. If you will give me now all the things we spoke of between us—and I forgot to mention a cane and pocket-handkerchiefs—and give me, besides, that meerschaum pipe of yourn, I'll promise not to hinder you, but let you go ahead and git Marietta if you kin. I must say it's a good deal for me to do, knowin' how much you'll git and how little you'll give, and knowin', too, the other chances she's got if she wanted 'em; but I'll do it for the sake of friendship."

"My meerschaum pipe!" groaned Mr. Rooper. "My Centennial Exhibition pipe!" His tones were so plaintive that for a moment Asaph felt a little touch of remorse. But then he

reflected that if Thomas really did get Marietta the pipe would be of no use to him, for she would not allow him to smoke it. And, besides, realities were realities and business was business. “That pipe may be very dear to you,” he said, “Thomas, but I want you to remember that Marietta’s very dear to me.”

This touched Mr. Rooper, whose heart was sensitive as it had never been before. “Come along, Asaph,” he said. “You shall have everything, meerschaum pipe included. If anybody but me is goin’ to smoke that pipe, I’d like it to be my brother-in-law.” Thus, with amber-tipped guile, Mr. Rooper hoped to win over his friend to not only not hinder, but to help him.

As the two men walked away, Asaph thought that he was not acting an unfraternal part toward Marietta, for it would not be necessary for him to say or do anything to induce her to refuse so unsuitable a suitor as Thomas Rooper.

About fifteen minutes before dinner—which had been cooked with bits of wood which Betsey had picked up here and there—was ready, Asaph walked into the front yard of his sister’s house attired in a complete suit of new clothes, thick and substantial in texture, pepper-and-salt in color, and as long in the legs and arms as the most fastidious could desire. He had on a new shirt and a clean collar, with a handsome black silk cravat tied in a great bow; and a new felt hat was on his head. On his left arm he carried an overcoat, carefully folded, with the lining outside, and in his right hand an umbrella and a cane. In his pockets were half a dozen new handkerchiefs and the case containing Mr. Rooper’s Centennial meerschaum.

Marietta, who was in the hallway when he opened the front door, scarcely knew him as he approached.

“Asaph!” she exclaimed. “What has happened to you? Why, you actually look like a gentleman!”

Asaph grinned. “Do you want me to go to Drummondville right after breakfast to-morrow?” he asked.

“My dear brother,” said Marietta, “don’t crush me by talking about that. But if you could have seen yourself as I saw you, and could have felt as I felt, you would not wonder at me. You must forget all that. I should be proud now to introduce you as my brother to any doctor or king or president. But tell me how you got those beautiful clothes.”

Asaph was sometimes beset by an absurd regard for truth, which much annoyed him. He could not say that he had worked for the clothes, and he did not wish his sister to think that he had run in debt for them. “They’re paid for, every thread of ’em,” he said. “I got ’em in

trade. These things is mine, and I don't owe no man a cent for 'em; and it seems to me that dinner must be ready."

"And proud I am," said Marietta, who never before had shown such enthusiastic affection for her brother, "to sit down to the table with such a nice-looking fellow as you are."

The next morning Mr. Rooper came into Mrs. Himes's yard, and there beheld Asaph, in all the glory of his new clothes, sitting under the chestnut-tree smoking the Centennial meerschaum pipe. Mr. Rooper himself was dressed in his very best clothes, but he carried with him no pipe.

"Sit down," said Asaph, "and have a smoke."

"No," replied the other; "I am goin' in the house. I have come to see your sister."

"Goin' to begin already?" said Asaph.

"Yes," said the other; "I told you I was goin' to begin to-day."

"Very good," said his friend, crossing his pepper-and-salt legs; "and you will finish the 17th of August. That's a good, reasonable time."

But Mr. Rooper had no intention of courting Mrs. Himes for a month. He intended to propose to her that very morning. He had been turning over the matter in his mind, and for several reasons had come to this conclusion. In the first place, he did not believe that he could trust Asaph, even for a single day, not to oppose him. Furthermore, his mind was in such a turmoil from the combined effect of the constantly present thought that Asaph was wearing his clothes, his hat, and his shoes, and smoking his beloved pipe, and of the perplexities and agitations consequent upon his sentiments toward Mrs. Himes, that he did not believe he could bear the mental strain during another night.

Five minutes later Marietta Himes was sitting on the horsehair sofa in the parlor, with Mr. Rooper on the horsehair chair opposite to her, and not very far away, and he was delivering the address which he had prepared.

"Madam," said he, "I am a man that takes things in this world as they comes, and is content to wait until the time comes for them to come. I was well acquainted with John Himes. I knowed him in life, and I helped lay him out. As long as there was reason to suppose that the late Mr. Himes—I mean that the grass over the grave of Mr. Himes had remained unwithered, I am not the man to take one step in the direction of his shoes, nor even to consider the size of 'em in connection with the measure of my own feet. But time will pass on in nater as well as in real life; and while I know very well, Mrs. Himes, that certain

feelin's toward them that was is like the leaves of the oak-tree and can't be blowed off even by the fiercest tempests of affliction, still them leaves will wither in the fall and turn brown and curl up at the edges, though they don't depart, but stick on tight as wax all winter until in the springtime they is pushed off gently without knowin' it by the green leaves which come out in real life as well as nater."

When he had finished this opening Mr. Rooper breathed a little sigh of relief. He had not forgotten any of it, and it pleased him.

Marietta sat and looked at him. She had a good sense of humor, and, while she was naturally surprised at what had been said to her, she was greatly amused by it, and really wished to hear what else Thomas Rooper had to say to her.

"Now, madam," he continued, "I am not the man to thrash a tree with a pole to knock the leaves off before their time. But when the young leaves is pushin' and the old leaves is droppin' (not to make any allusion, of course, to any shrivellin' of proper respect), then I come forward, madam, not to take the place of anybody else, but jest as the nateral consequence of the seasons, which everybody ought to expect; even such as you, madam, which I may liken to a hemlock-spruce which keeps straight on in the same general line of appearance without no reference to the fall of the year, nor winter nor summer. And so, Mrs. Himes, I come here to-day to offer to lead you agin to the altar. I have never been there myself, and there ain't no woman in the world that I'd go with but you. I'm a straightforward person, and when I've got a thing to say I say it, and now I have said it. And so I set here awaitin' your answer."

At this moment the shutters of the front window, which had been closed, were opened, and Asaph put in his head. "Look here, Thomas Rooper," he said, "these shoes is pegged. I didn't bargain for no pegged shoes; I wanted 'em sewed; everything was to be first-class."

Mr. Rooper, who had been leaning forward in his chair, his hands upon his knees, and his face glistening with his expressed feelings as brightly as the old-fashioned but shining silk hat which stood on the floor by his side, turned his head, grew red to the ears, and then sprang to his feet. "Asaph Scantle," he cried, with extended fist, "you have broke your word; you hindered."

"No, I didn't," said Asaph, sulkily; "but pegged shoes is too much for any man to stand." And he withdrew from the window, closing the shutters again.

"What does this mean?" asked Mrs. Himes, who had also risen.

"It means," said Thomas, speaking with difficulty, his indignation was so great, "that your brother is a person of tricks and meanders beyond the reach of common human calculation.

I don't like to say this of a man who is more or less likely to be my brother-in-law, but I can't help sayin' it, so entirely upset am I at his goin' back on me at such a minute."

"Going back on you?" asked Mrs. Himes. "What do you mean? What has he promised?"

Thomas hesitated. He did not wish to interrupt his courtship by the discussion of any new question, especially this question. "If we could settle what we have been talkin' about, Mrs. Himes," he said, "and if you would give me my answer, then I could git my mind down to commoner things. But swingin' on a hook as I am, I don't know whether my head or my heels is uppermost, or what's revolvin' around me."

"Oh, I can give you your answer quickly enough," she said. "It is impossible for me to marry you, so that's all settled."

"Impossible is a big word," said Mr. Rooper. "Has anybody else got afore me?"

"I am not bound to answer that question," said Marietta, slightly coloring; "but I cannot accept you, Mr. Rooper."

"Then there's somebody else, of course," said Thomas, gazing darkly upon the floor. "And what's more, Asaph knew it; that's just as clear as daylight. That's what made him come to me yesterday and go back on his first bargain."

"Now then," said Mrs. Himes, speaking very decidedly, "I want to know what you mean by this talk about bargains."

Mr. Rooper knit his brows. "This is mighty different talk," he said, "from the kind I expected when I come here. But you have answered my question, now I'll answer yours. Asaph Scantle, no longer ago than day before yesterday, after hearin' that things wasn't goin' very well with me, recommended me to marry you, and agreed that he would do his level best, by day and by night, to help me git you, if I would give him a suit of clothes, an umbrella, and a dictionary."

At this Mrs. Himes gave a little gasp and sat down.

"Now, I hadn't no thoughts of tradin' for a wife," continued Thomas, "especially in woollen goods and books; but when I considered and turned the matter over in my mind, and thought what a woman you was, and what a life there was afore me if I got you, I agreed to do it. Then he wanted pay aforehand, and that I wouldn't agree to, not because I thought you wasn't wuth it, but because I couldn't trust him if anybody offered him more before I got you. But that ain't the wust of it; yesterday he come down to see me and went back on his bargain, and that after I had spent the whole night thinkin' of you and what I was goin'

to say. And he put on such high-cockalorum airs that I, bein' as soft as mush around the heart, jest wilted and agreed to give him everything he bargained for if he would promise not to hinder. But he wasn't satisfied with that and wouldn't come to no terms until I'd give him my Centennial pipe, what's been like a child to me this many a year. And when he saw how disgruntled I was at sich a loss, he said that my pipe might be very dear to me, but his sister was jest as dear to him. And then, on top of the whole thing, he pokes his head through the shutters and hinders jest at the most ticklish moment."

"A dictionary and a pipe!" ejaculated poor Marietta, her eyes fixed upon the floor.

"But I'm goin' to make him give 'em all back," exclaimed Thomas. "They was the price of not hinderin', and he hindered."

"He shall give them back," said Marietta, rising, "but you must understand, Mr. Rooper, that in no way did Asaph interfere with your marrying me. That was a matter with which he did have and could have nothing to do. And now I wish you could get away without speaking to him. I do not want any quarrelling or high words here, and I will see him and arrange the matter better than you can do it."

"Oh, I can git away without speakin' to him," said Mr. Rooper, with reddened face. And so saying, he strode out of the house, through the front yard, and out of the gate, without turning his head toward Asaph, still sitting under the tree.

"Oh, ho!" said the latter to himself; "she's bounced him short and sharp; and it serves him right, too, after playin' that trick on me. Pegged shoes, indeed!"

At this moment the word "Asaph" came from the house in tones shriller and sharper and higher than any in which he had ever heard it pronounced before. He sprang to his feet and went to the house. His sister took him into the parlor and shut the door. Her eyes were red and her face was pale. "Asaph," said she, "Mr. Rooper has told me the whole of your infamous conduct. Now I know what you meant when you said that you were making arrangements to get clothes. You were going to sell me for them. And when you found out that I was likely to marry Doctor Wicker, you put up your price and wanted a dictionary and a pipe."

"No, Marietta," said Asaph, "the dictionary belonged to the first bargain. If you knew how I need a dictionary—"

"Be still!" she cried. "I do not want you to say a word. You have acted most shamefully toward me, and I want you to go away this very day. And before you go you must give back to Mr. Rooper everything that you got from him. I will fit you out with some of Mr. Himes's clothes and make no conditions at all, only that you shall go away. Come upstairs with me,

and I will get the clothes."

The room in the garret was opened, and various garments which had belonged to the late Mr. Himes were brought out.

"This is pretty hard on me, Marietta," said Asaph, as he held up a coat, "to give up new all-wool goods for things what has been worn and is part cotton, if I am a judge."

Marietta said very little. She gave him what clothes he needed, and insisted on his putting them on, making a package of the things he had received from Mr. Rooper, and returning them to that gentleman. Asaph at first grumbled, but he finally obeyed with a willingness which might have excited the suspicions of Marietta had she not been so angry.

With an enormous package wrapped in brown paper in one hand, and a cane, an umbrella, and a very small hand-bag in the other, Asaph approached the tavern. Mr. Rooper was sitting on the piazza alone. He was smoking a very common-looking clay pipe and gazing intently into the air in front of him. When his old crony came and stood before the piazza he did not turn his head nor his eyes.

"Thomas Rooper," said Asaph, "you have got me into a very bad scrape. I have been turned out of doors on account of what you said about me. And where I am goin' I don't know, for I can't walk to Drummondville. And what's more, I kept my word and you didn't. I didn't hinder you; for how could I suppose that you was goin' to pop the question the very minute you got inside the door? And that dictionary you promised I've not got."

Thomas Rooper answered not a word, but looked steadily in front of him. "And there's another thing," said Asaph. "What are you goin' to allow me for that suit of clothes what I've been wearin', what I took off in your room and left there?"

At this Mr. Rooper sprang to his feet with such violence that the fire danced out of the bowl of his pipe. "What is the fare to Drummondville?" he cried.

Asaph reflected a moment. "Three dollars and fifty cents, includin' supper."

"I'll give you that for them clothes," said the other, and counted out the money.

Asaph took it and sighed. "You've been hard on me, Thomas," said he, "but I bear you no grudge. Good-by."

As he walked slowly toward the station Mr. Scantle stopped at the store. "Has that dictionary come that was ordered for me?" he said; and when told that it could not be expected for several days he did not despair, for it was possible that Thomas Rooper might

be so angry that he would forget to countermand the order; in that case he might yet hope to obtain the coveted book.

The package containing the Rooper winter suit was heavy, and Asaph walked slowly. He did not want to go to Drummondville, for he hated bookkeeping, and his year of leisure and good living had spoiled him for work and poor fare. In this moody state he was very glad to stop and have a little chat with Mrs. McJimsey, who was sitting at her front window.

This good lady was the principal dressmaker of the village; and by hard work and attention to business she made a very comfortable living. She was a widow, small of stature, thin of feature, very neatly dressed and pleasant to look at. Asaph entered the little front yard, put his package on the door-step, and stood under the window to talk to her. Dressed in the clothes of the late Mr. Himes, her visitor presented such a respectable appearance that Mrs. McJimsey was not in the least ashamed to have people see him standing there, which she would have been a few days ago. Indeed, she felt complimented that he should want to stop. The conversation soon turned upon her removal from her present abode.

“I’m awfully sorry to have to go,” she said; “for my time is up just in the middle of my busy season, and that’s goin’ to throw me back dreadfully. He hasn’t done right by me, that Mr. Rooper, in lettin’ things go to rack and ruin in this way, and me payin’ his rent so regular.”

“That’s true,” said Asaph. “Thomas Rooper is a hard man—a hard man, Mrs. McJimsey. I can see how he would be overbearin’ with a lone woman like you, neither your son nor your daughter bein’ of age yet to take your part.”

“Yes, Mr. Scantle, it’s very hard.”

Asaph stood for a moment looking at a little bed of zinnias by the side of the door-step. “What you want, Mrs. McJimsey,” said he, “is a man in the house.”

In an instant Mrs. McJimsey flushed pink. It was such a strange thing for a gentleman to say to her.

Asaph saw the flush. He had not expected that result from his remark, but he was quick to take advantage of it. “Mrs. McJimsey,” said he, “you are a widow, and you are imposed upon, and you need somebody to take care of you. If you will put that job into my hands I will do it. I am a man what works with his head, and if you will let me I’ll work for you. To put it square, I ask you to marry me. My sister’s goin’ to be married, and I’m on the pint of goin’ away; for I could not abear to stay in her house when strangers come into it. But if you say the word, I’ll stay here and be yours for ever and ever more.”

Mrs. McJimsey said not a word, but her head drooped and wild thoughts ran through her

brain. Thoughts not wild, but well trained and broken, ran through Asaph's brain. The idea of going to Drummondville and spending for the journey thither a dollar and seventy-five cents of the money he had received from Mr. Rooper now became absolutely repulsive to him.

"Mrs. McJimsey," said he, "I will say more. Not only do I ask you to marry me, but I ask you to do it now. The evenin' sun is settin', the evenin' birds is singin', and it seems to me, Mrs. McJimsey, that all nater pints to this softenin' hour as a marryin' moment. You say your son won't be home from his work until supper-time, and your daughter has gone out for a walk. Come with me to Mr. Parker's, the Methodist minister, and let us join hands at the altar there. The gardener and his wife is always ready to stand up as witnesses. And when your son and your daughter comes home to supper, they can find their mother here afore 'em married and settled."

"But, Mr. Scantle," exclaimed Mrs. McJimsey, "it's so suddint. What will the neighbors say?"

"As for bein' suddint, Mrs. McJimsey, I've knowed you for nearly a year, and now, bein' on the way to leave what's been my happy home, I couldn't keep the truth from you no longer. And as for the neighbors, they needn't know that we hain't been engaged for months."

"It's so queer, so very queer," said the little dressmaker. And her face flushed again, and there were tears, not at all sorrowful ones, in her eyes; and her somewhat needle-pricked left hand accidentally laid itself upon the window-sill in easy reach of any one outside.

The next morning Mr. Rooper, being of a practical way of thinking, turned his thoughts from love and resentment to the subject of his income. And he soon became convinced that it would be better to keep the McJimseys in his house, if it could be done without too great an outlay for repairs. So he walked over to his property. When he reached the house he was almost stupefied to see Asaph in a chair in the front yard, dressed in the new suit of clothes which he, Thomas Rooper, had paid for, and smoking the Centennial pipe.

"Good-morning, Mr. Rooper," said Asaph, in a loud and cheery voice. "I suppose you've come to talk to Mrs. McJimsey about the work you've got to do here to make this house fit to live in. But there ain't no Mrs. McJimsey. She's Mrs. Scantle now, and I'm your tenant. You can talk to me."

Doctor Wicker came to see Mrs. Himes in the afternoon of the day he had promised to come, and early in the autumn they were married. Since Asaph Scantle had married and settled he had not seen his sister nor spoken to her; but he determined that on so joyful an occasion as this he would show no resentment. So he attended the wedding in the village church dressed in the suit of clothes which had belonged to the late Mr. Himes.