Uncle Terry

.... By ....

CHARLES CLARK MUNN

"The glasses might be a protection to susceptible young men," he answered, "and for that reason I would advise you to wear them."

"Shall I get some tomorrow to wear while you are here?" she queried, with a smile. "I will if you feel in danger."

"Would you do it if I admitted I was?" he replied, resolving to stand his ground and looking squarely at her.

But that elusive young lady was not to be cornered.

"You remind me of a story Bert told once," she said, "about an Irishman who was called upon to plead guilty or not guilty to the charge of drunkenness. When asked afterward how he pleaded he said, 'Bedad, I give the judge an equivocal answer.' 'And what was that?' said his friend. 'Begorra, whin the judge axed me was I guilty or not guilty I answered, "Was yer grandfather a monkey?" And then he gave me sixty days.'"

"Well," replied Frank, "that is a good story, but it doesn't answer my question."

That afternoon when Alice was alone with her brother he said, "Well, sis, how do you like my friend?"

"Oh, he means to be nice," she replied, "but he is a little thoughtless, and it would do him good to have to work for his living a year or two."

The two days intervening before Sunday passed all too quickly for the three young people. When Sunday morning came they of course attended church, and Frank found himself slyly stared at by all the people of Sandgate. He did not pay much attention to the sermon, but a good deal to a certain sweet soprano voice in the choir, and when after service Alice joined them he boldly walked away with her and left Albert chatting with a neighbor.

On the way home she, of course, asked the usual question as to how he liked the sermon.

"I don't think I heard ten words of it," he replied. "I was kept busy counting how many I caught looking at me, and whenever the choir sang I forgot to count. Why was it they stared at me so much? Is a stranger here a walking curiosity?"

"In a way, yes," answered Alice. "They don't mean to be rude, but a new face at church is a curio. I'll wager that nine out of ten who were there this morning are at this moment discussing your looks and wondering who and what you are."

A realization of her cool indifference tinged his feelings that evening just at dusk, where he had been left alone beside the freshly started parlor fire, and when the object of his thought happened in he sat staring moodily at the flames. She drew a chair opposite and, seating herself, said pleasantly:

"Why so pensive, Mr. Nason? Has going to church made you feel repentant?"

"I don't feel the need of repentance except in one way," he answered, "and that you would not be interested in. To be candid, Miss Page, I'm growing ashamed of the useless life I lead, and it's that I feel to repent of. A few things your brother said to me three months ago were the beginning, and a remark you made the day we first went sleighing has served to increase that feeling. Ever since I left college I have led an aimless life, bored to death by ennui and conscious that no one was made any happier by my existence. What Bert said to me and your remark have only served to make me realize it more fully."

"I am very sorry, Mr. Nason," she said pleasantly, "if any words of mine hurt you even a little. I have forgotten what they were and wish you would. The visit which Bert and you are making me is a most delightful break in the monotony of my life, and I shall be very glad to see you again." And then, rising, she added, "If I hurt you, please say you forgive me, for I must go out and see to getting tea."

The last evening was passed much like the first, except that now the elusive Alice seemed to be transformed into a far more gracious hostess, and all her smiles and interest seemed to be lavished upon Frank instead of her brother. It was as if this occult little lady had come to feel a new and surprising curiosity in all that concerned the life and amusements of her visitor. With true feminine skill, she plied him with all manner of questions and affected the deepest interest in all he had to say. What were his sisters' amusements? Did they entertain much, play tennis, golf or ride? Where did they usually go summers, and did he generally go with them? His own comings and goings and where he had been and what he saw there were also made a part of the grist he was encouraged to grind. She even professed a keen interest in his yacht and listened patiently to a most elaborate description of that craft, although as a rowboat was the largest vessel she had ever set foot on it is likely she did not gain a very clear idea of the Gypsy.

"Your yacht has a very suggestive name," she said. "It makes one think of green woods and campfires. I should dearly love to take a sail in her. I have read so much about yachts and yachting that the idea of sailing along the shores in one's own floating house, as it were, has a fascination for me."

This expression of taste was so much in line with Frank's, and the idea of having this charming girl for a yachting companion so tempting that his face glowed.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," he responded, "than to have you for a guest on my boat, Miss Page. I think it could be managed if I could only coax my mother and sisters to go, and you and your brother would join us. We would visit the Maine coast resorts and have no end of a good time."

"It's a delightful outing you suggest," she answered, "and I thank you very much, but I wouldn't think of coming if your family had to be coaxed to go, and then it's not likely that Bert could find the time."

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way," he said, looking serious, "only mother and the girls are afraid of the water, that is all."

When conversation lagged Frank begged that she would sing for him and suggested selections from Moody and Sankey, and despite her brother's sarcastic remark that it wasn't a revival meeting they were holding she not only played and sang all those time worn melodies, but a lot of others from older collections. When retiring time came Frank asked that she conclude with "Ben Bolt."

"I shall not need to recall that song to remind me of you," he said in a low voice as he spread it on the music rack in front of her, "but I shall always feel its mood when I think of you."

"Does that mean that you will think of me as sleeping 'in a corner obscure and alone' in some churchyard?" she responded archly.

"By no means," he said, "only I may perhaps have a little of the same mood at times that Ben Bolt had when he heard of the fate of his sweet Alice."

It was a pretty speech, and Frank imagined she threw a little more than usual pathos into the song after it, but then no doubt his imagination was biased by his feelings.

When they stood on the platform the next morning awaiting the train he said quietly:

"May I send you a few books and some new songs when I get home, Miss Page? I want to show you how much I have enjoyed this visit."

"It is very nice of you to say so," she replied, "and I shall be glad to be remembered and hope you will visit us again."

When the train came in he rather hurriedly offered his hand and with a "Permit me to thank you again" as he raised his hat turned away to gather up the satchels so as not to be witness to her leave taking from her brother.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN summer Southport island, as yet untainted by the tide of outing travel, was a spot to inspire dreams, poetry and canvases covered with ocean lore. Its many coves and inlets where the tides ebbed and flowed among the weed covered rocks, its bold cliffs, sea washed, and above which the white gulls and fishhawks circled; the deep thickets of spruce through which the ocean winds murmured and where great beds of ferns and clusters of red bunch berries grew were one and all left undisturbed week in, week out.

At the Cape, where Uncle Terry, Aunt Lissy and Telly lived their simple home life, and Bascom, the storekeeper and postmaster, talked unceasingly when he could find a listener, and Deacon Oaks wondered why "the grace o' God hadn't freed the land from stuns," no one ever came to disturb its quietude. Every morning Uncle Terry, often accompanied by Telly in a calico dress and sunbonnet, rowed out to pull his lobster traps, and after dinner harnessed and drove to the head of the island to meet the mail boat; then at eventide, after lighting his pipe and the lighthouse lamp at about the same time, generally strolled over to Bascom's to have a chat, while Telly made a call on the "Widder Leach," a misanthropic but pious protegee of hers, and Aunt Lissy read the paper.

Once in about three weeks, according to weather, the monotony of the village was disturbed by the arrival of a small schooner owned jointly by Uncle Terry, Oaks and Bascom, and which plied between the Cape and Boston. Once in two weeks services were held, as usual, in the little brown church, and as often the lighthouse tender called and left coal and oil for Uncle Terry. Regularly on Thursday evenings the few piously inclined, led by Deacon Oaks, gathered in the church to sing hymns they repeated fifty-two times each year, listen to a prayer by Oaks that seldom varied in a single sentence, and heard Auntie Leach thank the Lord for his "many mercies," though what they were in her case it would be hard to tell, unless being permitted to live alone and work hard to live at all was a mercy. The scattered islanders and the handful whose dwellings comprised the Cape worked hard, lived frugally and were unconscious that all around them was a rocky shore whose cliffs and inlets and beaches were so many poems of picturesque and charming scenery.

This was Southport in summer, but in winter, when the little harbor at the Cape was icebound, the winding road to the head of the island buried beneath drifts and the people often for weeks at a time absolutely cut off from communication with the rest of the world, it was a place cheerless in its desolation. Like so many woodchucks then the residents kept within doors or only stirred out to cut wood, fodder the stock and shovel paths so that the children could go to school. The days were short and the evenings long, and to get together and spend hours in labored conversation the only pastime. It was one of those long evenings and when Aunt Lissy and Telly were at a neighbor's and Uncle Terry, left to himself, was reading every line, including the advertisements, in the last Journal, that the following met his eye:

WANTED.—Information that will lead to the discovery of an heir to the estate of one Eric Peterson, a landowner and shipbuilder of Stockholm, Sweden, whose son, with his wife, child and crew, was known to have been wrecked on the coast of Maine in March, 187—. Nothing has ever been heard of said Peterson or his wife, but the child may have been saved. Any one having information that will lead to the discovery of this child will be amply rewarded by communicating with NICHOLAS FRYE, Attorney at Law, — Pemberton Square, Boston.

"Waal, I'll be everlastin'ly gol darned!" Uncle Terry exclaimed after he had read it for the third time. "If this don't beat all natur I'm a goat."

It was fortunate he was alone, for it gave him time to think the matter over, and after half an hour of astonishment he decided to say nothing to his wife or Telly.

"I'll jist breathe easy an' sag up," he said to himself, "same as though I was crossin' thin ice, an' if nothin' comes on't nobody 'll be the worse for worryin'."

Then he cut the slip out and hid it in his black leather wallet, and then cut out the entire page and burned it.

"Wimmin are sich curis creeters they'd be sure to want to know what I'd cut out o' that page," he said to himself, "an' never rest till I told 'em."

When Aunt Lissy and Telly came home Uncle Terry was as composed as a rock and sat quietly puffing his pipe, with his feet on top of a chair and pointing toward the fire.

"Were you lonesome, father?" asked Telly, who usually led conversation in the Terry home. "We stopped at Bascom's, and you know he never stops talking."

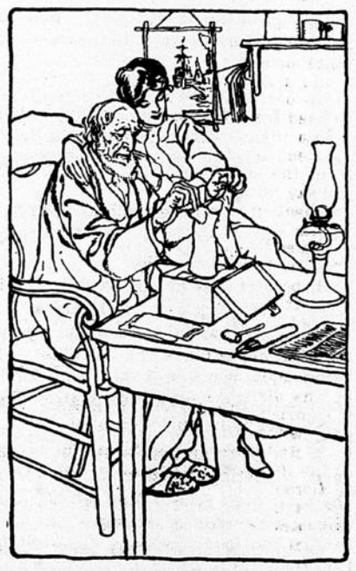
"He's worse'n burdock burs ter git away from," answered Uncle Terry, "an' ye can't be perlite ter him unless ye want t' spend the rest o' yer life listenin'. His tongue allus seemed ter be hung in the middle an' wag both ways. I wasn't lonesome," he continued, rising and adding a few sticks to the fire as the two women laid aside their wraps and drew chairs up. "I've read the paper purty well through an' had a spell o' livin' over bygones," and then, turning to Telly and smiling, he added: "I got thinkin' o' the day ye came ashore, an' mother she got that excited she sot the box ye was in on the stove an' then put more wood in. It's a wonder she didn't put ye in the stove instead o' the wood!"

As this joke was not new to the listeners no notice was taken of it, and the three lapsed into silence.

Outside the steady boom of the surf beating on the rocks came with monotonous regularity, and inside the clock ticked. For a long time Uncle Terry sat and smoked on in silence, resuming, perhaps, his bygones, and then said: "By the way, Telly, what's become o' them trinkets o' yourn ye had on that day? It's been so long now, 'most twenty years, I 'bout forgot 'em. I s'pose ye hain't lost 'em, hev ye?"

"Why, no, father," she answered, a little surprised. "I hope not. They are all in a box in my bureau, and no one ever disturbs them."

"Ye wouldn't mind fetchin' 'em now, would ye, Telly?" he continued after



She watched him take out the contents.

drawing a long whiff of smoke and slowly emitting it in rings. "It's been so many years, an' since I got thinkin' 'bout it I'd like to take a look at 'em, jest to remind me o' that fortunate day ye came to us."

The girl arose and, going upstairs, returned with a small tin box shaped like a trunk and, drawing the table up in front of Uncle Terry, set the box down upon it. As he opened it she perched herself on the arm of his chair and, leaning against his shoulder, passed one arm caressingly around his neck and watched him take out the contents.

First came a soft, fleecy blanket, then two little garments, once whitest muslin, but now yellow with age, and then another smaller one of flannel. Pinned to this were two tiny shoes of knitted wool. In the bottom of the box was a small wooden shoe, and though clumsy in comparison, yet evidently fashioned to fit a lady's foot. Tucked in this was a little box tied with faded ribbon, and in this were a locket and chain, two rings and a scrap of paper. The writing on the paper, once hastily scrawled by a despairing mothers' hand, had almost faded, and inside the locket were two faces, one a man's with strongly marked features, the other girlish with big eyes and hair in curls.

These were all the heritage of this waif of the sea who now, a fair girl with eyes and face like the woman's picture, was leaning on the shoulder of her foster father, and they told a pathetic tale of life and death; of romance and mystery not yet unwoven.

How many times that orphan girl had imagined what that tale might be; how often before she had examined every one of those mute tokens; how many times gazed with mute eyes at the faces in the locket; and how, as the years bearing her onward toward maturity passed, had she hoped and waited, hoping ever that some word, some whisper from that faroff land of her birth might reach her!

And as she looked at those mute relics which told so little and yet so much of her history, while the old man who had been all that a kind father could be to her took them out one by one, she realized more than ever what a debt of gratitude she owed to him. When he had looked them over and put them back in the exact order in which they had been packed, he closed the box and, taking the little hand that had been caressing his face in his own wrinkled and bony one, held it for a moment. When he released it the girl stooped and, pressing her lips to his weather browned cheek, arose and resumed her seat.

"Waal, ye better put the box away now," said Uncle Terry at last. "I'll jest go out an' take a look off'n the p'int, and then it'll be time to turn in."

CHAPTER XIV.

"I'VE got ter go ter Boston," said Uncle Terry to his wife a few days later. "Thar's some money due us that we ain't sartin we'll git. You an' Telly can tend the lights for a couple o' nights, can't ye? I won't be gone more'n that. Bascom's to take me up to the head, an' if the boat's runnin' I'll be all right."

This plan had cost Uncle Terry a good deal of diplomacy. Not only did he have to invent a reasonable excuse for going by exciting the fears of both Bascom and Oaks regarding money really due them, but he had to allay the curiosity of his wife and Telly as well. In a small village like the Cape every one's movements were well known to all and commented on, and no one was better aware of it than Uncle Terry. But go to Boston he must, and to do so right in the dead of winter and not excite a small tempest of curious gossip taxed his Yankee wit.

At Bath he had a few hours' wait and went to the bank and drew a sum of money from his small savings.

"Lawyers are sech sharps, consarn 'em!" he said to himself. "I'd better go loaded. Most likely I'll come back skinned. I never did tackle a lawyer 'thout losin' my shirt."

When, after an all night ride, during which he sat in the smoking car with his pipe and thoughts for company, he arrived in Boston, he felt, as he would phrase it, like a cat in a strange garret. He had tried to fortify himself against the expected meeting with this Frye, who, he felt sure, would make him pay dearly for any service. When he entered the rather untidy office of that legal light Uncle Terry looked suspiciously at its occupant.

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?" asked Frye after his visitor had introduced himself.

"Waal," answered Uncle Terry, taking a seat and laying his hat on the floor beside him, "I've come on rather a curis errand." And, taking out the slip he had a few days before placed in his wallet, he handed it to Frye with the remark, "That's my errand."

Frye's face brightened.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Terry," he said, beginning to rub his hands together. "If you have any facts in your possession that will aid us in the search for an heir to this estate we shall be glad to pay you for them, provided they are facts. Now, sir, what is your story?"

Uncle Terry looked at the lawyer a moment before answering.

"I didn't come here to tell all I knew the fust go off," he said. "I know all 'bout this shipwreck an' a good deal more that'll consarn ye, but fust I want to know who is lookin' for the information an' what's likely to cum on't."

It was Frye's turn to stare now.

"This man won't be any easy witness," he thought, and then he said, "That I am not at liberty to disclose until I know what facts you can establish, but rest assured that any information you may have, if it be proved of real value, will entitle you to an ample reward."

"I reckon ye don't quite ketch on to my drift," replied Uncle Terry. "I didn't cum here lookin' fer pay, but to see that justice was sarved an' them as had rights got thar dues."

"Well, sir," said Frye in a suave voice, "we, too, are looking to see the ends of justice served, but you must understand that in a matter of this importance we must make no mistakes. An estate awaits a claimant, but that claimant must establish his or her identity beyond the shadow of a doubt in order, as you must see, that justice may be done."

"Waal," replied Uncle Terry, stroking his chin with his thumb and finger while he deliberated, "I s'pose I may as well tell ye fust as last. I cum here for that purpose, an' all I want to fix is, if thar's nothin' in it ye'd keep it a secret an' not raise any false hopes in the minds o' them as is near and dear to me."

"It's a lawyer's professional duty