

Through the Forbidden Gates

The Black Cat

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October 1900

Through the Forbidden Gates.

\$200 Prize Story.

Carroll Carrington.

A Human Chameleon.

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Mr. Corndropper's Hired Man.

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Mr. Corndropper's Hired Man.*

(A Companion to "Ely's Automatic Housemaid.")

BY W. M. STANNARD.



HERE was a mild sensation at the East Slowcumbe railway station when a stranger, bearing a two-gallon can, carefully crated, stepped off the 3.30 accommodation, and there were many speculations hazarded as to his identity, business and destination, but, without stopping to question or exchange words with any of the waiting crowd, he stepped across the platform to where Farmer Corndropper was waiting with his gray mare and buggy. He handed the farmer a letter, stepped into the buggy and was driven slowly away. Without a word of welcome or of apology to his visitor, the farmer opened the letter and proceeded intently to read the contents :

DEAR SIR: — We forward you herewith — or, rather this will be handed to you by — Tom, our Automatic Farmer (Ely's patent). If same proves unsatisfactory after one month's constant use, money will be refunded. The active principle by which the farmer is controlled is contained in an oil (two gallons forwarded) embodying all the essential nutritive elements which, acting upon our improved substitute for cerebral tissue, contained in the farmer's cranial cavity, results in a faculty which cannot be distinguished from ordinary common sense.

Tom is guaranteed to do twenty-four hours' work a day — seven days a week, if necessary — without strain. He can perform any ordinary task that an intelligent man can do.

IMPORTANT. — The automatic farmer will obey *only* the person who feeds him. His present control expires at 6 P. M. to-day, after which hour he will be subject to your orders.

Convinced that Tom will give perfect satisfaction, we remain,
Yours sincerely,

THE ELY MFG. Co. (Limited).

Josiah Corndropper meditatively folded and pocketed this letter, clucked to the gray mare and fixed his gaze upon his silent companion, who, however, paid no heed. He was tall, broad-shouldered and robust looking, with a wonderfully intelligent and life-like countenance, upon which his owner gazed with wonder and admiration.

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Tom promptly followed his master when he alighted at the farmhouse and seated himself in a corner of the kitchen, where he remained, dumb and deaf to all the subdued comments upon his appearance and deportment.

"No, M'riar," answered the farmer to his wife's enquiries, "he won't be ready t'use t'll six o'clock, so ye'll hev ter wait," and she returned reluctantly to her duties.

At six o'clock, sharp, following the printed directions stitched to the back of Tom's vest, Josiah cautiously lifted the brim of his straw hat, poured some "food" into the aperture disclosed and stepped back to await results.

Instantly the figure gazed curiously around and then sat upright at attention, regarding his owner enquiringly.

"Gid up!" said Josiah.

Tom promptly arose and the farmer and his wife stumbled over the furniture in the involuntary backward movement which they simultaneously made.

"What *you* laughin' fer, drat yer?" shouted Josiah, regaining his equilibrium, but the automaton made no response.

"Waal, he don't talk back, like some hired men," exclaimed Mrs. Corndropper, amused and relieved.

"Course, he's only a machine," said the farmer, mollified. "Tom, go milk the cows."

This order was obeyed with neatness and dispatch. Four great pails were soon standing on the dairy floor, and Tom was awaiting further instructions.

"Waal, by gum, ye do work mighty spry," ejaculated Josiah. "Ye might 's well go out an' finish the chores," and Tom was gone like a flash. Soon the wood box was brimming, the animals foddered, and all the odds and ends of the day's work attended to in less than half the usual time, and the indefatigable farmer had again reported for duty.

Josiah scratched his head reflectively. "Able to work all night, is he? Guess I'll set him t' buildin' stun wall. Here, Tom, go out 'n straighten out th' wall around the ten-acre lot. Then in the mornin', 'bout four o'clock, come in an' wait at the back door, till I give ye su'thin' else t' do." Tom was out of sight in the direction of the ten-acre lot before Corndropper had done wondering.

When Josiah came down in the morning the first thing he saw was the automaton, standing stolidly on the back porch, evidently awaiting orders.

"Mornin', Tom. It's time ter milk an' do up the chores ag'in. Seems ez ef as intelligent-lookin' a cuss ez you be would almost 'a known it 'thout bein' told." Before this mild criticism, the only reproof which his owner ever bestowed upon him, was finished, Tom was in the barnyard, dispatching the work.

"Waal, by gum!" chuckled Corndropper, "an' only costs six cents a day, nuther. Gee, ef this ain't a snap." He scanned all he could see of the stone wall, and soliloquized:

"I b'leeve he's done it all right. I must set him 'bout the farmin' right away; won't need t'hire nobody this season!" and Josiah smiled audibly over the saving of three men's hire as he went in to breakfast.

Picking his teeth on the porch, he said to his patient helper:

"Waal, Tommy, may's well start in plowin' to-day. Yoke up th' three-year olds, an' then I'll tell ye what ter do."

But Tom did not move.

"What ails ye?"

Josiah was alarmed. Could the machinery be out of order so soon? Was the thing a failure, after all? Visions of disappointed hopes flitted through his mind faster than he could formulate them, but as he stood in thought he happened to glance at the clock. The automaton must be fed regularly twice in twenty-four hours or it would "strike."

"Waal, by gum! Why didn't I think of that before?"

So Tom had his breakfast at once, after which he went to the barn and under fresh instructions returned with the astonished animals and with the big plow under one arm.

"Waal, by gum!" exclaimed Josiah.

As the days went on Tom plowed and planted, hoed, hayed and harvested, with no assistance other than general directions. He did all the "chores," indoors and out, and when farm work was slack, made a firm friend of Mrs. Corndropper by beating carpets, moving furniture, scrubbing paint and blacking stoves.

Josiah thoroughly enjoyed the change. From being a hard-worked farmer, with three hired men to look after, he became a

man of leisure, giving his attention to the settlement of important local and national affairs — at the village grocery.

Spring had passed, summer had come and gone, and autumn was waning, when one brisk October morning Josiah announced:

“I’m a-goin’ over ter th’ county seat to-day, to see ’bout cancelin’ that morgidge — we’ve made ’nough this summer to pay it off — an’ as I hain’t nothin’ special for Tom t’do, I’m a-goin’ ter leave him fer you.”

“Now, Josiah, you needn’t do no sech thing! Don’t you think I c’n look out fr myself, ’thout havin’ a iron man ’round t’ keep tabs on me?”

Josiah saw that something was wrong.

“No, M’riar, I thought mebbe you’d hev suthin’ fer him t’ do.”

She said at first that she hadn’t, but the truth was, that having had no experience in “feeding” Tom, the act upon which his obedience depended, she rather dreaded the responsibility.

Josiah perceived her reluctance, and took a firm stand.

“Now, M’riar, I want ye to come right out and feed him; might as well larn fust as last. Needn’t use him ef y’ don’t want’er.”

So Mrs. Corndropper meekly accompanied her husband to Tom’s quarters and fed the automaton, who then, at her command, sat in a kitchen corner to be ready in case of need.

“Don’t fergit ter hev him do the chores,” said her husband, as he drove off.

When she was actually alone, she found the silence oppressive. Her thoughts, in spite of her best intentions, ran on the many depredations recently committed in neighboring towns, and supposed to be the work of tramps, and though she had never been molested by any of the fraternity, she could not help feeling apprehensive.

“I wish’t old Grip was here,” she thought, forgetting Tom entirely; “he use ter seem almost human, an’ would ha’ been kinder compny. Don’t s’pose nuthin’ ’ll happen, but he’d be wuth two men t’ lay out a tramp.”

But toward eleven o’clock her fears were forgotten, and she was just about to peel the potatoes for dinner, when a shadow fell upon the threshold, and she turned to see her worst apprehensions

realized — there stood two of the dirtiest and most villanous-looking specimens of man she had ever seen.

“Please, mum, will yer gin us suthin’ to eat?”

“I never feed tramps.”

“Say, Bill, git onter dat!”

“Ef ye two don’t git out pretty lively, I’ll set th’ dog on yer!”

The tramps indulged in a hearty laugh, and then one said, in a peremptory tone:

“Come, ole lady, trot out yer grub, or we’ll help ourselves.”

Mrs. Corndropper’s temper, never of the mildest, was now strained beyond endurance, and she emptied the tin pan of potatoes and water over her visitors.

With the aid of a wet dish rag and two towels, she was soon bound, gagged and helpless, and was obliged to sit speechless in the kitchen while the tramps rummaged the pantry and gorged themselves on her abundant and unsurpassed cooking.

Then they proceeded to investigate the closets and dining-room for liquid refreshments and “boodle.”

While both were busily engaged in ransacking the sideboard, an idea occurred to Mrs. Corndropper. Wriggling and twisting, she rubbed the towel binding her hands upon a projecting nail until it parted, and then quickly untied the one fastening her to the chair. She took out her gag as she stole quietly to the corner where Tom was sitting, and whispered in his ear.

The tramps had just discovered a plump stocking in a drawer of the sideboard, and were about appraising its contents.

“Gosh, Jim, dis is der stuff! Ain’t we playin’ in great —”

He dropped the stocking with a howl, as a sharp rap descended upon his head. There was a simultaneous yell from Jim, two more blows and two loud screams.

“Now, Tom, take ’em by the scruff o’ the neck, and thump their heads together.”

Howls, curses, kicks and blows were alike futile. The iron clutch kept its hold, and the thumps were delivered with clock-like regularity.

Mrs. Corndropper calmly superintended.

“Now, shake ’em up *well!*”

The motion of the automaton changed, and dislocated curses and

disconnected kicks, accompanied by the rattle of boots, heads and teeth, testified to the thoroughness of the shaking process.

"Take 'em outdoors and squeeze 'em," was the next order, and the smothered execrations that floated in through the window told of a literal execution of the command.

Mrs. Corndropper closed and locked the windows and doors, pocketed the key, and said to Tom :

"There, that'll do ; pick 'em up and go along ahead o' me."

Tom had them under his arms like two grain sacks, and was half way to the gate. As he passed through, both tramps made vigorous efforts to hold on to the gate posts, but only badly wrenched arms and roars of pain resulted.

Then they began to beg and plead for pardon and release, but Mrs. Corndropper paid no attention, and the little procession entered the village surrounded by small boys, and soon attracted half the floating population. At the constable's door the tramps were handcuffed and committed to the lock-up, and Mrs. Corndropper entered a formal complaint.

Two weeks later she received the following letter :

MRS. JOSIAH CORNDROPPER,

Dear Madam: — Please find enclosed check for \$500, being the amount of the joint reward offered by the towns of Enfield and Slowcumbe for the apprehension of James Sullivan and William McNulty, said desperadoes having been captured under your direction. Also please accept our thanks for your public-spirited action.

Yours respectfully,

HENRY HAWBUCK, *Town Treasurer.*

As no vote of thanks could be made intelligible to Tom, and no increase of rations would be grateful or necessary to his inner anthropomorphy, the Corndroppers were forced to be content with putting their appreciation into a testimonial to the Ely Mfg. Co. (Limited), and such public utterances as Josiah found time to make at the grocery, where he never tired of boasting of a hired man who could do the work of three, on six cents a day, and earn his employer a five hundred dollar premium the first year.

