

MAJOR CORNELIUS

About thirty years ago I was clerk in a lawyer's office on a very small income and unmarried. I then lodged in Henry Street, and had a very comfortable and healthy life kept by an excellent cook and a maid. Miss Jones, who treated all her boarders with consideration and did not exact from them more than they were able to pay. We dined at her house only on Sundays and on Christmas Day—that is, unless invited out. The dinner was always early—at 1 o'clock—and always followed the same order. On the first Sunday in the month we had chicken and bacon; on the second, boiled beef, garnished with carrots and turnips (alternating with parsnips), and sweet pudding; on the third Sunday we had roast mutton and fried potatoes; on the fourth, roast beef and mashed or boiled potatoes. When there were five Sundays in a month, the additional Sunday was supplied with whatever was left of the week's provisions, three pounds of beef to a pudding.

I do not know how it was that the boiled potatoes at Miss Jones's always tasted of dish-cloth. I know very well that potatoes are not boiled in a cloth; nevertheless the pudding, which is, did not taste of the cloth, and the potatoes were—There are several plausible explanations of this. One is, that the potatoes were boiled in a cloth, and the cloth was soiled and re-used, till the grease over on the outside roughened, then parted. Still they encased his feet. A little blackened grease filled the split, some stick-plaster disguised it and was polished over; but these were expedients postponing the evil day, nothing more. That the Major plucked and scrawled to raise the money for repairs, all the while he was in the room, and with which the new boots were paired, how they were repaired, kept indoors when the streets were muddy and the rain fell. The long slender fingers were nearly transparent—were wonderfully skillful with the needle. The Major repaired his own garments; we believed that he mended his own stockings. The maid told us his darning was beautiful. One day that Robbins stayed at home with a cold, he heard the Major ask the maid of all-work very kindly to let him have a hot bath in his room. Next Sunday he appeared in brilliant—well, clothes, and we found he had turned an old pair himself; we noticed that they bulged in the knees, and that the heels were a trifle raised. He recommended them to our sister's altered situation.

If Major Cornelius was self-denying in the matter of drink and clothing, it was not that he could not appreciate generous liquor, and was not particular about dress. On the contrary, he was a good judge of wines, and he was fastidious about garments, and he was fastidious about his own self-esteem more than to his dress. He did as much of his own washing as he well could with a can of boiling water in his own basin. Washing is a heavy item in expenditure in London. I believe that some of the Major's garments were of this threadbare and patched, that he was ashamed to send them to the laundry, and that therefore he did his best with them at home. His bedroom was high up, in the attic. He paid less than we, and was therefore obliged to put up with inferior accommodation. In winter he suffered much. I fear, from want of fire. The parlor fire was not lighted till 4 p. m., so that it was beginning to grow cold when he retired to his room. In his own room under the stairs it was cold; nevertheless he sat there when the bed was made, and he was from about noon to 5.

Before that he remained in the parlor, watching the expiring of the little fire. If for show, not warmth, during breakfast. Only in the coldest weather would he descend to the kitchen for a few moments to stand by the stove and warm his hands, while Miss Jones, "dish-avowed," hid in the pantry. If the day were frosty he would go out, to his blood in circulation, and his cheeks warmed into color—a bright color in his cheeks like the roses in a child. That old cat with the teeth and the false front and the dirty collar rented the first floor, and had her own sitting-room, and a fire there; but from motives of delicacy no doubt, and for fear of establishing a precedent, never invited the Major to it.

He was so modest that he had once only in the best circles, and had acquainted with him in the best circles. He visited and was visited by some of them. Since that affair of his brother he had withdrawn himself from his fellows; he shrank from meeting those who knew the circumstances, and he suspected more of being aware of them than really did know. He was very proud—not haughty, and he was very kind to his younger brother. We notice of his knowledge of the circumstances exactly, and I cannot now say what was truth and what was conjecture in the story whispered among us. My impression is that the brother, to whom he was devotedly attached, had not been honored; he had left the country, and the Major's respects were strained to the utmost to meet the needs that came on him as security. We none of us returned to allude to this topic; the disgrace rankled in the old man's heart; there was an ever-open wound there, which we were careful not to touch.

There was a childlike simplicity in the old man which rather amused us youngsters; now, looking back on him, I find it was admirably touching. However, never again did we see him. We were told of the world that he was in Miss Jones and the old lady with the teeth he was courteous, with an old-fashioned courtesy that flattered them and won their hearts. He paid Miss Jones the same as we, £1 per week, but he dined daily at home. It was said that Miss Jones set her cap at the Major, and that she only allowed him to remain on these moderate terms because she desired to become Mrs. Cornelius. I do not believe it was so. I think she strained a point so as to retain an old Waterloo officer in her house, to give it an air of superiority above other boarding-houses in the neighborhood.

Whenever I think of the Major Cornelius I remember his hair, I have already said it was thin; it was always elaborately brushed and watered, the hair drawn forward from behind the ear, and turned in a sort of curl over the temple. His collar were always clean and very stiff, and his neck cravat was tucked up to the throat. A kind old man, whose name was Mr. Robbins, with rheumatic fever he set up his night after night, and ministered to him as a nurse. When Robbins was better, and able to receive our call, he sat up in his bed, leaning on the Major, who had his arm round him, and smiled and looked as pleased with our congratulations as though that vulgar Robbins had been his own son.