

The Free Press Short Story

The Humble Sexton of Peace Valley

Virginia Terhune Van de Water

WARD THAYER looked with surprise and regret at the black-clad girl standing by his desk. "You mean, Miss Starr, that you are leaving, giving up your position?"

"Yes, sir," was the firm reply. "I am sorry to go—but I must."

"Your father's death has made a change in your prospects?" asked her employer. "You do not need to work now?"

Helen Starr flushed. "Yes, sir," she said again, "at least my father's going"—she paused to steady her voice—"has made it necessary for me to be at home with my mother. But it has also made it most necessary for me to work."

"But," argued the man, "can you get a better position than the one you have here as my secretary?"

"No, sir, not one nearly so good. But I must be at home, out in Peace Valley. My mother is an invalid, and I must be near her. She has had a weak heart for years," she added by way of explanation, "but father, has been with her to care for her. Now she has nobody but me. I must take his place."

"But what work can you get in that little village?"

Again the girl flushed, but this time more deeply. "I can take the job my father had," she replied in a low voice. "What was that?"

"He was sexton of the little church out there. He kept it cleaned and he also looked after the churchyard back of the church."

"Looked after it? What do you mean?"

"I mean he cut the grass, and raked the paths free of weeds, and kept the whole place in good order."

"But, child," protested the man, "you cannot do that and of things! It is not a woman's work."

Helen answered firmly. "It must be my work. I have spoken to the church committee about it, and they have promised to give me a trial. You see, my father held that position for twenty years; so they feel willing to try me out. I am very strong, physically, Mr. Thayer."

"But," the man of business made one more plea, "are hard things connected with such a position—such as—"

"I know what you mean," Helen spoke quickly. "Such as arranging for burials, and so forth. I can do that. I can always get a man to do the heavy work. And all details I can attend to. I have seen my father do it. And—yes, Mr. Thayer, this will enable me to live at home with mother, to run in often and see how she is getting on. Our house is only five minutes' walk from the church."

After a long silence, the man held out his hand. "You are a brave girl, Miss Starr. I am sorry to see you go and I wish you all luck."

"Thank you," the usually clear voice was husky as the girl turned away. She had been happy here. She would be glad when these partings were over.

Bernard Dater, one of the young men in the office, had asked her to lunch with him that noon. Across the small table he added his arguments to those of Mr. Thayer. "You will be burying yourself alive," he insisted, "besides, with a sinister grin, assisting at the burial of any of the villagers who happen to die. Helen is absurd."

She had liked Bernard and been flattered by his attentions, for he was handsome and clever. His remark brought no smile to her lips. Suddenly she felt that what he deemed amusing was a sign of poor taste.

"I have made my decision," she said gravely.

"Then," leaning across the table towards her, "am I never to see you any more? Or—may I come out to call?"

"I shall be glad to have you come out and see my mother and me if you care to," she replied.

"Good! I shall drive out some Sunday—it's only thirty miles, you say? And we'll drive over to dine somewhere."

Helen shook her head. "I cannot go on Sundays. That is my busiest day at the church, you see."

"You'll tire of it," he said bluntly. "It is not a lady's job."

Helen only smiled and changed the subject.

As she was leaving the office that afternoon, Kenneth Thayer, her employer's nephew, stopped her. "I want to say good-by. I mean I do not want to go," he corrected, "for I am sorry to see you go. My uncle has been telling me of your plan. Do you mind if I say that I consider you very plucky?"

"Thank you," her voice quavered slightly. "This man was not so handsome as Bernard Dater, in fact she had considered him rather quiet and self-absorbed—not jolly and attentive like Bernard. Now she saw that there was a great kindness in his honest blue eyes."

"My new job is not a lady's job, perhaps," she said, "but it is what I must do, so I am not considering any other phase of the matter."

"You are putting your hand to the plow and not looking back," he remarked thoughtfully. "Perhaps, sometime, you will let me come out to see how you drive a furrow."

"Thank you," she said.

"I shall make it some evening, if you

do not mind," he added. "You will be at leisure then, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," she rejoined. "Thank you and good-by." She felt the pressure of his hand for some time after she had left the office in which she had worked for three years. Strange that in her sadness at leaving there should be comfort in her thought of Kenneth Thayer, but only embarrassment in her thought of Bernard Dater, when she had known better than she had known her employer's nephew. Well, it made no difference now. She was going into an entirely different sphere of life from that in which she had moved in the city. All connections with her former associates would be severed. She would belong henceforward to the laboring class, she reflected with a whimsical smile.

During the next few weeks Helen had little time to remember the city she had left behind her. Her new work was arduous. It was late April, and there was a great amount of work to be done in the little cemetery. The weeds sprouted much faster than the flowers, and they had a way of encroaching on the gravel paths. The work in the little church was easier, although the ladies must be kept swept, the cushions free from dust, the desk and the pulpit immaculate. After each service the place must be put to rights, the books rearranged, bits of paper picked up. Besides that Helen must be at home before each meal to see that her mother was not overworking. Mrs. Starr could do only light tasks about the house because of her heart. Moreover, she was lonely, and must be cheered. She turned to her daughter as a child might to a parent.

"What should I ever do without you?" she would sigh. "Now that father is gone, you are all I have left."

"And you are all I have," Helen would rejoin blithely. "Is it not a blessing that we have each other?"

As the weeks passed, Helen found herself unable to do the work in the little churchyard dressed in such garments as she had worn in town. She donned what she called her uniform. This consisted of tall khaki pyjamas, a blouse of the same color and heavy canvas gloves. When her mother shook her head deprecatingly at her changed appearance, Helen laughed.

"You always looked so dainty when you went to the office," mourned Mrs. Starr. "What would the people there say if they could see you now?"

"I do not care what they would say," the girl averred.

A week later she found that she did care, when Bernard Dater, in his light-colored car, drove up at the cemetery gate and came towards her. "Can you tell me where I can find Miss Starr?" he asked.

As the girl bending down weeding a grave stood up, he gasped in astonishment. "My word, Helen!" he exclaimed. "I never knew you!"

She tried to smile and held out her hand in greeting. She noted his instant hesitation as he saw her dirt-stained gloves, which she removed quickly.

"I am sorry to be so busy just now," she said formally. "Did you stop at the house?"

"Yes," he nodded. "I did, and saw some one who told me you were up here. I fancy it was your mother."

"Yes," she said, "it was my mother."

"Helen," he said, impulsively, "this is an awful position for a woman! Why, my dear girl, your friends would not believe it of you. I would like to bring some of the people in the office out here; but you can see for yourself what a disagreeable surprise it would be to them. Surely this is not necessary!"

Helen stood very straight and gazed

into his dark eyes. "It is necessary," she said, "and if you or anybody else would be ashamed for me, I want you to know that I am not ashamed for myself. I am doing the only thing that I can under the circumstances. And," a spark flashing in her eyes "you are quite welcome to tell your friends in the office what I have said. When they hear it, they will probably not care to come."

"No, they probably would not," he retorted. "I shall give them your message. It is evident that I am intruding on your labors and would better go. Good day!"

"Good day!" Helen rejoined steadily. She returned to her task, but as she bent over the grave she was weeding, tears came to her eyes.

"He will give them all that message," she murmured, "and none of them will come out. I hope they will not! I do not want to see any of them. Except," with a little gulp, "Kenneth Thayer."

One beautiful Sunday in the midsummer of the following year, the little church in Peace Valley was over. The last of the congregation had gone home, but Helen Starr, sexton, lingered to see that all was in order for the evening service. This done, she came down the aisle toward the front door. As she was facing the light, she could not see the features of a man who came toward her.

"Good morning!" he said. "As he turned slightly she recognized Kenneth Thayer."

"Why, Mr. Thayer!" she exclaimed. "Where did you come from?"

"I drove out from the city this morning," explained Kenneth, taking her hand in his warm grasp. "I arrived in time for service. By the way—it struck me as a strange coincidence that the minister should have chosen a text that will always make me think of you. 'No man having put his hand to the plough—'"

She smiled. "I remember you quoted it to me the last time I saw you."

"May I drive you to your house?" asked Thayer.

"If you will stay to dinner with Mother and me," replied Helen impulsively.

After she had given the invitation, she almost hoped he would not accept, for the little home was so unpretentious, the fare so plain. At once she reproached herself for the thought. She wanted people to know her as she was.

"I would love to stay," said Kenneth. "I should like to meet your mother."

Mrs. Starr greeted the visitor cordially. "I am glad to know any of Helen's associates," she said. "Especially any member of Mr. Thayer's family. Mr. Thayer was always so kind to Helen."

"He found her a most valuable secretary," rejoined Ward Thayer's nephew, smiling down at the pale face. "We miss her at the office, but I think she is fortunate to be out here in this quiet place."

"I hope it will not be too hard for her during the winter," said Mrs. Starr wistfully.

"Of course it will not be," interposed Helen. "Suppose we let Mr. Thayer go upstairs to wash his hands while you and I put the dinner on the table, Mother dear."

As the guest washed his hands in the tiny bathroom at the head of the stairs, he wondered if the fragile little hostess would be here long enough to see how her daughter would stand the work of next winter.

Kenneth seemed so much at home in the little cottage, and chatted with so much ease that Helen forgot her passing reluctance to have him see her home. What difference did it make that he had money and was accustomed to luxury if he could adapt himself to these surroundings with such ease?

He did Mrs. Starr very much good by taking her for a short drive that afternoon. "Suppose we go somewhere to-morrow and give your daughter time for a little rest before evening service?" he proposed.

"Then will you take a cold supper with us?" asked Mrs. Starr.

Kenneth glanced at Helen, and saw the welcome in her eyes. "I shall be glad to," he said gratefully.

"It has been a perfect day," he told his hostess after supper.

He repeated the same thing to Helen, when after church that evening he went with her toward her home, where he had left his car. He had said he preferred walking to service instead of driving. He had lingered to help her close the church. Now the pair strolled along the moonlit road.

"Yes, it has all been perfect," he averred. "May I come again, Helen?"

"Certainly you may," she said softly. As they reached the gate of the little cemetery she asked, "Would you care to walk through here, just to see where I do my work?"

He accepted eagerly, and side by side they strolled down the paths of God's acre.

"Do you remember," asked the man softly, "what Shelley said about the English Cemetery in Rome? 'It almost makes one in love with death to think of lying in so sweet a spot? One could say the same of this lovely place.'"

"Thank you for telling me that," said Helen softly. "I am never sad when I am working here; it all seems so sweet and peaceful. Did you ever see the English Cemetery in Rome, and isn't Keats buried there?"

"Yes," Kenneth replied. "Keats is buried there. I have been there, and it is beautiful."

"I would love to go to Italy! I wonder if I ever shall."

"Of course you will," her companion averred; then he was silent. What it would be to travel with this girl through life!

Kenneth did not tell her this yet. He would not hurry her. He came but to Peace Valley a number of times during the summer. Helen would not admit to herself that she cared for him until he had seen her in her working uniform. Deliberately she suggested to him that he drive out some afternoon, naming a day on which he would be sure to find her working in the little cemetery.

An afternoon in late September Kenneth Thayer stopped his car at the gate of the little cemetery and walked quickly to the khaki-clad figure raising dead leaves from a section. As he approached her, she turned and faced him. Her gloves were stained with mold, her cheeks were flushed, and the autumn wind had ruffled the hair that escaped from under the cloth cap. She tried to laugh.

"You see me at my worst!" she exclaimed challengingly. She pulled off her glove and held out her hand to him. He took it in his firm clasp and lifted it to his lips.

"I see you at your best, dear," he said softly. "Driving your furrow straight and deep, never looking back. Helen I love you! Will you marry me?"

Mrs. Starr cried out when Helen and Kenneth told her they were engaged. "I am so happy that I have to weep a bit," she explained.

"Helen is not going to leave you, dear Mrs. Starr," Kenneth explained. "You must live with us wherever we are. I am determined that our summers shall be spent in Peace Valley. I want to

build out here a house that is large enough for all of us."

The widow laid a gentle hand on his. "Thank you, dear Kenneth. I shall stay with you and Helen as long as I live."

Later, when Helen had left the room, the mother added what she would not say in her daughter's presence. "I shall not be here long, dear," she confided to Kenneth. "The heart weakness increases steadily and the end cannot be far off."

The end came before the snow flew. A week later Kenneth and Helen were married in the little church Helen loved, by the minister who had known her since childhood. One of the witnesses was the minister's wife.

"I do not see how we are going to get along without you, Helen," the clergyman said when he bade the young couple good-by. "You took up the work your dear father had performed with a fidelity like his. I had my doubts about your strength and courage, but you have proved equal to every emergency. If you have looked back once, nobody suspected it."

"She has not looked back," declared the young husband proudly. "Not once since she put her hand to the plow. And now we are going to look forward together, she and I. We call to-morrow for Italy, but next summer we shall come back to spend a part of each summer in Peace Valley."

"In Peace Valley, where she plowed such a straight furrow," said the minister's wife softly. She held the girl in her arms for a moment; then Helen and Kenneth Thayer walked together from the little church into the glory of the autumnal sunset with the little of a great happiness in their eyes.

SPOILING A COLOR

Blue is one of the most beautiful colors in the world. The blue sky of spring, even though it veils a dun earth before the grass has started and before the leaves are out, makes everything seem fair. As we look up at the sky, our feet keep time to the singing of our hearts.

Blue is such a beautiful color, giving such pleasure to the eye and such joy to the heart, that one wonders how anybody ever has the audacity to say, "I'm blue."

How does anyone venture to give to a glum, ugly mood the name of one of the most beautiful of colors. Blue should be kept sacred to our brave moods, to our uplifted, happy moments, instead of being applied to that wretched state of mind in which cowardice and gloom and ingratitude are mingled in about equal proportions.

Perhaps we intuitively disguise our unworthy mental attitudes by giving them attractive names. Why spoil a color to save one's pride?



Canadian Skippers Giant "Air Ferry"



Pictured shaking hands just before they took off on the opening of regular airplane service between New York and Bermuda are the two skippers of the giant "air ferries." At the RIGHT is Captain W. Neville Cumming, skipper of the British craft, Cavalier, owned by Imperial Airways, and former Vancouver, B.C. pilot. At the LEFT is Captain R. O. D. Sullivan, of the Bermuda Clipper of Pan-American Airlines. The first passenger lists of the aeroplanes were comprised of newspapermen and national celebrities.

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