# A Life-Saving Service

By Virginia Woodward Cloud

THE Summalt house rocked and creaked in the arms of an approaching storm, and giant clouds fled across the moon of the early autumn night. With the first drops of chill rain, a man, tall and ungainly, grew out of the shadow close to the wall of the house, and went to a broken chink in a closed shutter and deliberately peered in.

He drew his cloak closer and stared at the preparations inside, which appeared to be of a festal nature. Great logs blazed on the hearth, two lamps were lighted, the table was laid for one only, and a small man hurried in and out of a rear kitchen, with pent excitement in every movement. His trousers were drawn upward to an unnatural altitude by his suspenders, and his gray hair was brushed stiffly back, accentuating the startled expression of his thin face. He had donned a clean collar, and his heavy boots had been carefully brushed—this the looker-on observed at once, his gaze following the other with interest as he placed upon the table a dish of steaming sausages.

The man outside uttered an exclamation which seemed that of satisfaction, although the odor of supper could not prevail against the wind and walls, and peered closer while the one inside went to a closet in the chimney corner and brought out a tea-caddy and disappeared in the kitchen to return with a pitcher, which he put carefully on the table.

"Cider—by the great horn!" muttered the outsider. He pressed to the door and gave a loud rap. There was silence for a moment.

"Dropped dead, I reckon," he added to himself. But the door opened, letting in a rush of cold wind and rain, and revealing the shrinking form of the host, whose face showed pale now in the lamplight, as he said, feebly:

"Got back, Manda?"

A buggy came along . . . In the moonlight a woman . . . using the whip valiantly.

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The man from without stepped inside, startling the other to such an extent that he shut the door against the wind and stood staring up at the heavy, deliberate figure of Number Two.

"No, Manda hasn't come, but I have." The stranger took his broad-brimmed felt hat off and deliberately shook a circle of rain around him.

"Are you Henry Summalt?"

The little man nodded in silence.

"That's all right, then."

Henry found his voice.

"If you don't mind, sir,—I'll—I'll take your hat. It—the rain's bad for the floor. My wife is mighty particular about the floor!"

The other laughed in his throat. It sounded like a reminiscent laugh.

"Yes; that's it, bad for the floor! Well, I was coming along your road, Mr. Summalt, and I saw the storm and stopped in. I'm bound for the night express down yonder at your switch station, by and by."

He removed his cloak and hung it on a nail behind the door, while Henry Summalt stared, puzzled.

"Yes, sir," he said at length, "you're welcome, I'm sure. I don't have much company. I'm busy mostly—my wife, she's away to-night"—Henry stopped, his rather tired and startled eyes arrested by the stranger's nod of comprehension, as he went across to the fire—"she's gone up to Mis' Brogden's to the nite meetin'. She'll be back by and by, but"—he glanced over his shoulder, as if expecting a habitual protest—"I'm—I'm just goin' to eat supper alone, and maybe—I reckon you'd better have some, sir."

"I reckon I had," said the stranger, with a nod of thanks. He noticed that something of latent courage sprung to Henry's eyes at the prospect of a guest. For to the hospitable soul who never exercises his hospitality it is absolute joy to extend it, and Henry Summalt hurriedly placed another chair and plate, with signs of excitement. For, after all, what is a secret orgy if no one shares it? He put a loaf of bread beside the sausages and a dish of apple-butter. The stranger eyed this and Henry as he took his seat opposite.

"Don't have sausages often, do you?" he said abruptly. "Special treat?"

Henry looked up in surprise, and passed the plate.

"Yes, sir—that is, I just got these and—and put them aside for to-night, because she—my wife—doesn't like—that is, she has bread and spreadin' for supper."

The other nodded gravely, deliberately.

"That's it! Bread and spreadin' all the year round. I've been there! I was married to one once who had the bread and spreadin' habit, straight along."

It takes a small touch of nature to make kin or kind. There was a deliberation about the man's steady mien which inspired confidence. Henry's knife paused midway, and something escaped expression in his meek countenance as the two men looked at each other with the understanding of slowly awakened trust. Then he filled the other's glass with cider.

"I'm right glad of company," he said, with the breathlessness of utterance which denotes that the speaker seldom exercises liberty of expression. "I was goin' to eat by myself and get through soon because——"

"Of the sausages," put in the other flatly. "I know!"

Henry nodded across his teacup.

"Y'see she, my wife 's a first-class housekeeper,—the best in these parts. Why, she just keeps house straight along and sets so much store by it—she can take a prize—a first—at any fair, for pickles and cakes and things, and she can keep goin'——" Henry sighed a little; "nothin' don't tire her! As for cleanin',"—he glanced at the floor apprehensively, "she can see dust where there aint none! And y'see it's easier to clean up after bread and spreadin' than fried things, Manda says. But, sir, she can make——"

"The dust fly," interpolated the other, leaning back, "if there was any. Mine could. Yes, man! Mine not only kept house, and cleaned everything off the face of the earth, but she kept everything else that war'nt nailed down—'cept me!" he chuckled a little in his throat; "no, sir, she couldn't keep me!"

Henry Summalt leaned forward an elbow on the table in the thrall of a delicious and unlicensed confidence, such as he had ever dreamed of experiencing. In all his married life this was the first time another man had unsealed that door of suppression which had become so habitual a part of him that it was almost now a mechanical process of thought.

"Is she dead?" he whispered.

"*She* dead? No, man!" the stranger chuckled again. "Her sort don't die. It's the other folks that dies! That's why I cut out and went into the Spanish War. 'Cause I wanted to live!"

Henry stared. Such heroic measures had never dawned in thought upon his horizon.

"And ye didn't go back?" he uttered in awed tone.

"Go back? To her? The stranger stretched his legs under the table, and folded his arms, as he looked Henry's meagre form up and down with something of pity. "There ain't nothin' this side of Jordan could get me back! What did I go for? A man's only got one life, I reckon, and if he feels that being all devilled out of him, what's he got? There warn't but one thing to do, and I done it. I left."

Henry sighed. His rolled-up shirtsleeve showed a very thin arm, and there was a flush rising to his pinched face born of unique excitement. He balanced his knife and forgot the sausages.

"Warum—my wife's first husband—went in the war, too. He was killed," he said, presently.

The stranger took his pipe out and filled it deliberately.

"She mourned a heap, I reckon?" he said gravely.

Henry nodded again.

"Terrible! I never seen him, but he was a mighty fine man—'cordin' to Manda. I hear of him—I hear a heap of him—from Manda. There wasn't a thing Warum couldn't do—'cordin' to her."

Henry sighed a little, and the stranger's pipe paused in the act of lighting.

"That so?" he said, interestedly.

"Yes, sir! I reckon he had everything his way in this house—Warum did! And he was a mighty handsome man—'cordin' to Manda."

The stranger lighted his pipe and then closed his eyes in the luxury of the first smoke. A smile of complete satisfaction gathered at their corners.

Presently he said:

"Kind of man that always wiped his boots careful, eh?"

Henry looked surprised.

"Always!"

"Never had to wash the dishes, eh?"

Henry stared.

"Like you do," added the other, and again Henry nodded.

"Or churn?" said the stranger.

Another nod.

"Or milk?"

Henry shook his head and sighed a little.

"He wasn't the kind—'cordin' to Manda, she'd never dared—"

The stranger coughed suddenly.

"Reckon you don't smoke in here?" he said.

"No, sir—that is, you see, it smells up the place—my wife's mighty particular."

The other blew a deliberate cloud of smoke to the ceiling with unconcealed enjoyment, then turned his eyes on Henry Summalt.

"I used to be just that kind of a jack-rabbit! Wear an apron in the house?"

Henry's pale face colored in the lamplight, and he nodded.

"Better for my clothes," he said apologetically.

The stranger arose and knocked his pipe in the chimney, and stood looking down on the other.

"Yep; that's it. I had one. Yes, sir! I washed dishes and churned and milked and swept and boot-brushed and got browbeat and pretty well tarred inside with bread and spreadin' and—yes, sir— I wore an apron! If I see one hangin' to a line now, I swear loud at it!"

Henry's hands were on his knees. The luxury of this confidence was too deep for expression. The stranger suddenly clapped his hand upon his side and added: "Then one night—when I set on the back step eatin' bread and spreadin', with the dishes waitin', it come to me thet I warn't born a hen chicken, and, sir, I lit out that night and 'listed! Yes, I did! I was gettin' as puny and poor-livered as you!"

"Dunno how you dared!" said Henry, softly.

"I reckon yourn calls you a fool pretty regular?" added the stranger, suddenly.

Henry nodded.

"And you ain't doin' nothin' to prove you ain't?"

Henry's upward gaze was appealing.

"A woman like that—like Manda—don't leave a man much chance to be anythin' else, does she now? She's mighty high-flyin' an'—an'——"

"Tempery and high-colored," said the other. "I know 'em! I had one."

"An'—an', handsome, some folks think," added Henry.

The other adjusted his pipe.

"Gimme a bowl of mush in preference," he said.

Henry's heart was beating rapidly. "It's mighty queer to sit an' talk of it," he said. "I ain't met you before, neither, an'—an'—it's all queer, the way you come in an' all—but, I do say, sir, you seem to know more than anybody I

ever held conversation with! But—but she'll be back before long. I must do the dishes and—and—and blow out the smell of the sausages, you know! Would you mind coming in the kitchen, sir? She—she's mighty particular about smokin' in here. I reckon I can blow the smell out though."

The other blew a second cloud to the ceiling and took an ancient timepiece out.

"Hold on, man! I'm going to smoke right here. It's good for Mrs. War—Summalt's soul. So Warum cleared out, did he?"

Henry paused, plates in his hands, as he rose.

"He didn't want to go—'cordin' to Manda—but his country called. That's what she says, and he wasn't the man to back down! Not him. 'I may never return to my wife and home,' he said, 'but you may glory in knowin' I died for my country!' he said."

"He did!" the stranger's utterance was admiring enough to satisfy the little man opposite; 'died for his country, did he? Country called him, did it? Went to glory wrapped in a flag! My! warn't he a hero?"

Henry nodded seriously.

"That's what he was—'cordin' to Manda!"

The stranger shut one eye and looked in his pipe.

"You ain't had any longings to clear out and go die of somethin' beside bread and spreadin' yourself, have you?"

"Me! Me go away?"

The stranger nodded.

"*Why not?* Warum went."

"That was different. His country called." Henry paused, and suddenly put the plates on the table again; his hand shook a little as he passed it over his face. "I've got a daughter out West—my first wife's child. I've wanted to see Mimie bad—ever since—ever since——"

"You come East and was married by the Widow Warum," added the stranger. "Well, what's to hinder?"

Henry swallowed something, but his face showed a sudden flame of longing mingled with resentment.

"I—I haven't just been able to leave," he said.

"I see. What money you had is paid quarterly to—er—your wife, I reckon." Henry stared, and the other added: "I told you I had one like her once."

He went to the window and peered through the broken chink, then turned and stood with hands thrust in his pockets. "Moon's out again. 'Twas mostly wind. I'm goin' to take the express presently, and strike out for the West in the morning. Want to go 'long, old man?"

At Henry's petrified stare, in which fear, amazement and longing were blended, he added a slap on the shoulder, at which the little man trembled.

"Why, bless your galluses! What d'ye think I'm here for? Look at this!" He took a letter out and put it in Henry's hand. "Read it! read it!" Then he opened the door, letting in a rush of autumn wind laden with the odor of wild grape. The moon lay white outside, and the world stretched wide beyond. Henry, trembling at the mystery, stood studying the few lines under the lamp. When he looked up there were tears on his face, and he brushed them away with a shaking hand.

"Did she write these here, sir?—Mimie?"

"Sure! I run across her and her husband and kid by accident. Went out to their place to inspect a pasture lot. She treated me white, and I told her I was coming East—and a heap more. She told me about you. She wants you and I promised to fetch you. That's all. Get your duds! We've got twenty minutes."

Henry drew his hand across a confused brow.

"Manda will—Manda will——"

"Right you are! Manda will—she will as long as there's breath in her body! Hustle, man!"

Henry's chin trembled.

"If I can see Mimie once I won't mind dyin'!" he suddenly burst out.

"Dyin'! You ain't a-goin' ter die! It's just the wishin'-you-were feeling. Get any money?"

Henry looked nervously over his shoulder.

"There's a little—it was mine—I mean—it's——"

"In the old tea-caddy" put in the other. "Get it!"

Henry's eyes suddenly started in fear. He made a stumbling step forward.

"Who are you? How d'ye know it all? Who are you, anyway?"

The stranger chuckled enjoyingly as he bent to utter one word, and Henry started back.

"Now, I reckon you'll come, 'cause there ain't anything ter do 'cept for us to light out together!" he said calmly.

A whistle sounded up the road as the two men leaped a fence and made for the shed, which was the switch station. Behind them the house stood lighted and warm. Before them sounded a horse's hoofs on the road. They ran into the shed and drew back in the darkness watching. The smaller of the two dragged a gripsack. A buggy came along, with a light horse driven at a hard pace. In the moonlight a woman could be seen sitting very erect and using the whip valiantly.

"She'll find the sausages!" muttered the smaller man.

"Old gray, ain't it?" said the larger.

"He pulls steady and works steady and never goes out o' the road," said the little one, "but Manda believes in the whip."

Here the train rushed up to the shed.

"Just the sort of jack-rabbit I used to be!" chuckled the stranger, as they emerged from the darkness, "but maybe I'll live to rescue Number Three!"