

A REAL ANGEL

by CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY

IN fiction, the school-mistress who forsakes the Groves of Academe for that West so felicitously described as "wild and woolly" is invariably young, beautiful and charming. Miss Cordelia Penley was neither the one nor the other nor the third.

Miss Penley was tall. The romancer would have described her as slender; the truth-teller would have said she was "skinny." Miss Penley's attire was quite in keeping with her appearance; both were severely plain. She wore her hair drawn back tightly from her brow and tied in a knot behind, which not even the most vivid and generous imagination could have called Greek; her features were not Greek, either.

Alas! the inexorable truth must be confessed. She was a homely, middle-aged woman, plain, modest, unpretentious, well enough educated to make an excellent school-teacher.

Miss Cordelia, tiring one summer of her boarding-house, rented a little cottage on the outskirts of the town, and lived there alone with a cat and a canary bird. One rainy night in the spring, just as the knight of Miss Cordelia's latest dream was thundering with mailed fist upon the portcullis of the castle, she was recalled from Spain to her cottage by a fierce knock on the door.

While Miss Cordelia was timid, she was not a coward. She quietly stepped toward the door, wondering who it could be, when the knock came softly again. Her speculations could not solve the mystery, she calmly opened the door.

A fierce gust of windy rain swirled through the opening, which was partly blocked by a timid, shrinking figure, not at all like the bold knights of Miss Penley's dreams. The man was soaking wet; his clothes were thin and old; his hat was a sodden mass. He coughed deprecatingly as he stood before her, staring at her in mock entreaty.

"Come in out of the wet," she said, stepping back a little from the entrance.

She had nothing on earth to fear from this little man who appeared wretchedly cold and miserable. The newcomer needed no second invitation. Closing the door quickly after him, he stood shivering on the spotless threshold of the clean, warm little room.

Miss Cordelia, although her heart was full of compassion for the poor man, looked very grimly at him. He therefore resisted the inclination to step nearer to the stove, although he could not check an involuntary movement in that direction.

"You can go over there and sit down," said Miss Penley, pointing to a wooden rocker near the stove.

"Thank you, ma'am; you're very good," replied the little man, bowing not ungracefully, and eagerly availing himself of the permission.

"I'm sorry," went on Miss Cordelia, "that I have no garments in the house suitable to your sex."

"It don't matter, ma'am," answered the man. "This heat'll dry me out soon."

"Ma'am," said the man, deprecatingly, "I'm awful down on my luck. I ain't really a tramp, although I seem so. I was workin' back East with an engineering gang and I had a accident and got sick and spent six months in a—hospital. They discharged me from there, cured, although I ain't been well since. I heard that the Arapahoe and Pacific Railroad was doin' some buildin' and I walked here from Kansas City, and I find I'm just too late. The road buildin' gang is filled, and they've gone on to the mountain division two hundred miles from here. I haven't had nothin' to eat all day; I couldn't get any work, and I haven't got a cent of money. I thought maybe you or your husband could give me a bite to eat and a place to sleep for the night. If you've got any chores to do—wood to split, or anything like that, or garden to spade—I'll be glad to do it in the mornin'."

"I have no husband," said Miss Cordelia, the blood flaming into her cheeks with a sort of shame that she should be forced to such a confession.

"I beg pardon, ma'am, I'm sure. A widow, likely?" asked the little man so respectfully that no one could take offense at his query.

"I'm unmarried," answered Miss Cordelia severely.

"You don't say!" was the comment, and there was infused in it just the requisite degree of surprise to escape the charge of impertinence and yet to convey to the listener a sense of amazement that so rare an opportunity had been neglected by the other sex.

"I suppose, then, that I can't stay here?" continued the little man dubiously.

"How did you happen to come here?" asked Miss Cordelia.

"Why, you see, ma'am, I started to walk down the line to the next town and it came on to rain and yours was the last house—and, I'm ashamed to say, I went around to the side of the house and peeped in. And you looked so nice and comfortable, ma'am, settin' them all alone by the fire, I said to myself, 'George—George Smets is my name, ma'am. George, there's a lady that has a kind heart, and if God has distributed things right she'll have a good husband and it'll be safe for a poor outcast like to them!'"

The flattered was of the grossest kind, but there was an air of sincerity about the little man that robbed it of much that was offensive. Miss Cordelia had been so little flattered, so rarely even noticed, that she swallowed the bait whole.

"I'm sure," she said, "that that is very nicely said. Should be glad to take you in if I had any me folks around, but it would hardly be—" she hesitated—

"proper. You understand?"

"Of course, ma'am, being a gentleman, I see. I'm sorry I troubled you. I thank you for having took me in at all."

Mr. Smets's grammar was hardly as good as his manners.

"Well, you sit down here by the fire and make yourself comfortable," said Miss Cordelia, "and I'll go into the kitchen and see if I can find something for you to eat before you go."

An old maid's larder is not a very good foraging place to find things for hungry men. But Miss Cordelia managed to assemble a serviceable meal for she was an adept in the noble science of cookery. When the little man picked up his napkin, snowy, spotless, in his gray hand, the contrast struck him.

"If you please, ma'am," he said, "is there any place I can wash my hands?"

"But your coffee will get cold," remonstrated Miss Penley.

"I had rather drink cold coffee with clean hands, ma'am, and a pure heart," said Mr. Smets.

Miss Penley had been compelled absolutely to confide in some one, and that some one was naturally her spiritual adviser, who by good fortune happened to be at home. She had described, with minute accuracy, her visitor of the night before. She had begged the bishop to say nothing about the affair.

Then she covered the coffee cup with the saucer and sat down to await her guest's return.

He came back in a short time, looking really quite presentable. With a little bow, stiffly returned by the lady, he sat down at the table.

Miss Penley lifted her hand.

"Grace before meat," she said.

"True, ma'am," said Mr. Smets, "but I'm not a professin' Christian; will you say it for me?"

Miss Penley rose and repeated her invocation. Mr.

Smets, immediately the "Amen" was uttered, fell to. When the first ardor of his appetite was appeased, the conversation was resumed.

"You said you were not a professing Christian?" asked the lady.

"No'm," was the reply.

"Well, even atheists have to be fed, I suppose," returned Miss Cordelia, somewhat grudgingly.

"I ain't exactly an atheist. As far as that goes, I don't deny that there is a God, which would be an assumption on my part. I just say I don't know anything about it."

"Have you ever read the Bible?"

"No'm."

"I wonder you don't know anything about it," said Miss Cordelia.

"Just so, ma'am," assented Mr. Smets deprecatingly.

"If you were to read the Bible, I'm sure you would know something. The bishop says that no one can read the Bible intelligently and disbelieve it. I will give you a little Testament when you go away to-night. Will you promise to read it when you get time?"

"I certainly will, ma'am," returned Mr. Smets. "And I'll treasure it as a remembrance of one of the kindest ladies I ever chanced to meet. And now I suppose I've got to go."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Miss Cordelia.

She rose with her guest and they both stepped to the door. The wind was blowing a tornado, and it could not have rained harder if a cloud had burst over the cottage. Mr. Smets, however, and bank back, he contemplated the blast. Miss Cordelia looked from the warm, light room to the shivering little man and then to the swirling wet blackness outside. She heard him cough and that decided her.

"I couldn't turn a dog out in weather like that," she said determinedly. "You'll have to stay here all night."

"But, ma'am, think of—"

"If I can stand it," returned Miss Penley grimly. "I guess you can. There's a spare bedroom yonder; you can go in there and sleep."

"I'm not fit to lie in a decent bed," said the tramp, the and I'm not accustomed to it, any way. If you'll let me take some of these rugs, I'll just go in there and lay down on the floor—"

"Very well," replied Miss Penley, who began to be a little frightened as to the consequences, now that she had taken the step.

"And I'll get up, ma'am, and build the fires for you in the morning. I seen where the wood-box was in the kitchen."

Then he bowed deeply to her again and turned away.

It was morning and bright daylight before Miss Penley awoke. She rose to her feet and laid the horse-pistols back in the doorway with a prayer of thanksgiving that that had been no need for its use.

Then after some hesitation she stepped to the door of the spare chamber and keeping well out of view knocked upon it. There was no answer. She knocked louder, knocked again, and a third time, and then summoning all her courage she peered into the room. It was empty. She went into the kitchen. There was nobody there.

Her glance fell upon the dresser. The doors of it were open, the silver was gone! She threw open the door of her own room. Her bureau drawer was open, so was her empty purse; her poor jewelry gone! He had taken everything of value in the house. Stop! There was one thing he had left behind—the little Testament she had given him. He had laid it across the top of the coffee-cup.

She sank down in the Boston rocker, hid her face in her hands and cried bitterly. The only man who had ever paid her a compliment, the only man who had ever looked at her with an admiring eye, was a thief, an ingrate! Her heart was broken.

Again the wind, again the rain, again Miss Penley alone in her little cottage, again a knock on the door. Just twenty-four hours had elapsed since the first knock had come with its portentous train of consequences. With a firm step, a composed manner in spite of a wildly beating heart, she strode to the door and threw it open. Mr. George Smets stood on the threshold smiling and bowing deprecatingly, but with a shame-faced look in his eyes.

Miss Cordelia stood like a statue of Fate, towering over him.

"Well, sir," she began.

Mr. Smets stepped inside, and with a gesture at once dignified and dramatic drew from the side pocket of his coat a miscellaneous bundle of small silver, including several pieces of jewelry, and laid the articles on the table. From his other pocket, he fished out a damp roll of bills, added it to the little pile, thrust his hand inside his waistcoat and bowed with some of his old grace of manner, and an air of great relief.

"Hump!" said Miss Cordelia, "so you brought them back, did you?"

"Yes, ma'am," returned Mr. Smets. "As you see, I ain't a regular thief, ma'am, not but what I ain't done things that I'm ashamed of before now, but I don't believe I ever robbed a defenseless lady what had took me in and treated me as kind as you did. I got clean away this mornin' after I took your silver and then my conscience—We'll allow that even agnostics might have consciences, ma'am?"

Miss Cordelia nodded.

"Well, whatever it was here—Mr. Smets laid his hand on his breast—"he wouldn't let me go no further.

The idea come to me late in the afternoon that I'd got to come back. It had begun to rain again and that brought the whole thing back to me, how you'd been kind to me and treated me like a gentleman and how I'd never been brought in contact with such a lady before. An', in short, ma'am, here I am. Here's your silver, your jewelry and your money. I'm 'shamed to have took them and I want you to forgive me and let me go with the memory of the kindest woman and the finest woman, ma'am, if you'll allow me to say it, that I ever met with."

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"It's quite true," continued Miss Penley, turning to the sheriff.

"Please, please, bishop," interrupted Miss Penley, in a voice full of entreaty.

Whereupon the bishop, after a long look at the unfortunate woman, retired into the shadow and stood motioning.

"It's quite true," continued Miss Penley, turning to the sheriff. "He came to me last night, ran on Miss Penley unmercifully. He told me his story. He wanted to get out to the end of the railroad where they are building the new division. I gave him what money I had and found it wasn't enough and I gave him the silver, too. So you see," she went on, "I have no cause to arrest this—gentleman."

There was a pause before the appellation, but a less perceptible one than before.

"No, I s'pose not," returned the sheriff dubiously, "unless I rope him down on general principles as a suspicious character."

"He's—he's an old friend of mine," said Miss Penley.

Mr. Smets started nervously, for the rap was vigorous and authoritative.

Neither of them had time or opportunity to do anything, however, for the door was flung rather rudely open, and in stepped the county sheriff, followed by a grim deputy, and, in the background, the bishop. Miss Penley had been compelled absolutely to confide in some one, and that some one was naturally her spiritual adviser, who by good fortune happened to be at home. She had described, with minute accuracy, her visitor of the night before. She had begged the bishop to say nothing about the affair.

But it happened that the bishop, returning from a late call, had passed Mr. George Smets under the lights of a drug store window. He had recognized him from the description, and had observed that he was heading in the direction of Miss Cordelia's lonely cottage. Fearful lest she might be in some danger, he had summoned Bill Sadler, the sheriff, and his deputy, and had followed Mr. Smets. Hence the dramatic entrance of the trio.

Mr. Smets was not satisfied, it was quite evident. He stood looking from one to another. It was the bishop himself who came to the rescue.

"I guess we have come on a fool's errand," he said, smiling and including himself in the folly. "Miss Penley has no charge to prefer against this—" the bishop looked at Mr. Smets and with some hesitation followed Miss Cordelia's lead—"gentleman," he added.

"No, not at all," said Miss Penley eagerly.

"So we had better wish her good-night."

"An' leave her with this here desperado?" interrupted the sheriff. "You needn't think, bishop, because he's a little man, that he ain't dangerous; the little

man kin hold a gun big enough to pot a buffalo, an' one of the smallest men that I ever seed was loose lightnin' in a gun play."

"I think you can safely leave us," said the bishop.

"I am sorry indeed to have you out on such a friendless occasion."

"Oh, no apologies necessary, Right Rev."

"Wal," drawled Mr. Sadler, "I guess we got you to rights now; got you the goods on. Come along."

Mr. Smets moistened his lips nervously, looked at Miss Cordelia, bowed profoundly to her, straightened himself up, threw back his shoulders, and turned to the sheriff.

"I'm right," he said, with a well-feigned effort at cheerfulness.

"Stop!" said Miss Penley suddenly.

"What is the matter with this?" she hesitated—

"Wal, good-night, Miss Penley," said Mr. Sadler.

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